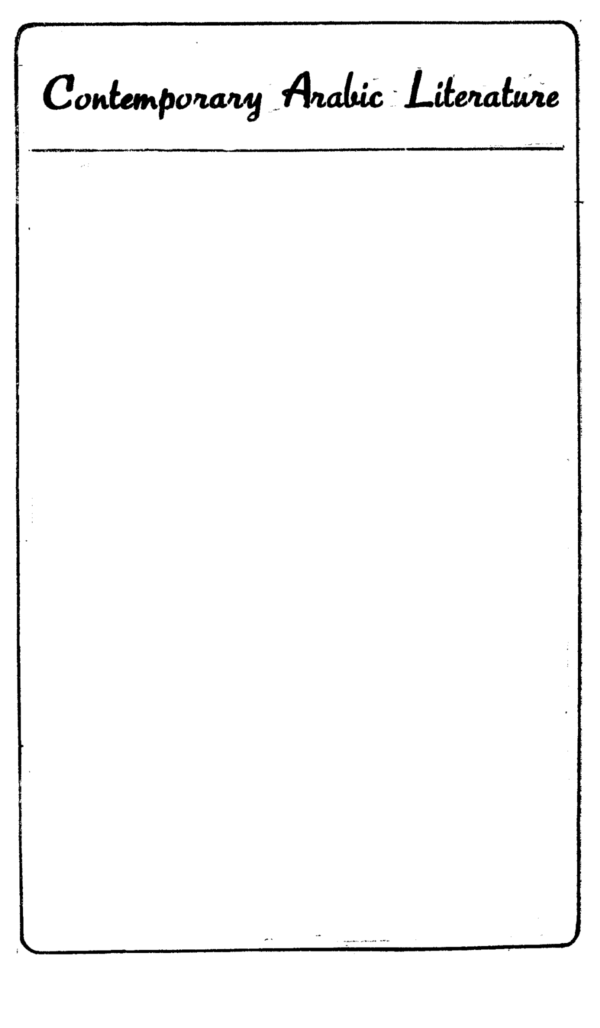
TRIAL AT MIDNIGHT
A NOVEL



The General Egyptian Book Organization

Lay-out by

RAGIA HUSSEIN


Contemporary Arabic Literature

TRIAL AT MIDNIGHT

A NOVEL

By

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GENERAL EDITOR OF THE SERIES

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General Editor's Note

As its title implies, this series is designed to introduce the English reader to contemporary Arabic literature **in translation.** The writers chosen include those novelists, poets and dramatists who best represent the current literary output, primarily in Egypt, but elsewhere in the Arab world as well. Though literary merit is the major criterion, it is not the only basis for the choice of works for translation : to be truly representative the series must take into consideration such criteria as popularity, influence and modernity. A best-seller may not be of the same literary quality as an obscure novel whose success has been more critical than popular, but the fact that a book has captured the imagination of the Arabic reading public means that it should have a place, on account of its significance, on our short list. Such best-sellers are, however, rarely sensational in the European sense : they succeed because of their direct appeal to the «common» reader, taking their material from his daily life, his major preoccupations and immediate interests.

The sense in which «contemporary» is used has been a little extended to include all writers, both dead and living, who represent the spirit of our «age» — an age which is not restricted, for our purposes, to the post-War period. In some cases the adjective will appear superfluous as certain genres did not appear in Arabic until after World War I, such as the novel, the short story and modern drama ; but in poetry the distinction is important. A revolution in poetic theory and practice may have started in the 1930's, but the «new» poetry is as recent as the 1950's. The emphasis will always be on the currently published, currently read.

The present series should fill a gap, as most translations of Arabic literature are either confined to classical literature (pre-Islamic or early Islamic) or, if they cover «modern» literature, stop somewhere in the 1950's. However, certain genres of modern Arabic literature have safficiently developed to be read and enjoyed alongside those of developed nations. The modern short story in Arabic is a notable example and it will be amply represented in the series. This is true of the modern novel, the drama and, of course, of poetry. Ambitious as it may seem, the purpose of this series is not to offer specimens for cultural or linguistic study but living works for reading and enjoyment.

The translators and revisers are mostly university lecturers or professors, strictly specialized in modern literature. Each work will have an introduction, often originally written in English. Care is taken to ensure accuracy in the rendering and the information offered on the writer.

M. Enani

Introduction

BY

SAMIR SARHAN

Since the begining of his career as a fiction writer Mohamed Galal has produced over ten novels. This substantial literary output is worthy of critical attention, particularly as its scope enables the critic to study the various stages of Galal's development as a novelist, and to evlluate his contribution to the Egyptian novel.

Mohamed Galal is one of the few contemporary Egyptian men of letters who championed the novel as the art-form most capable of portraying the movement of a fast changing world, and the challenges it poses to modern man. From modest literary beginnings, Galal has progressed to greater, and, indeed, quite impressive achievements in his chosen field thanks to his perseverance and extreme dedication to his art.

Over the past few years, the performing arts (that is, show business, both commercial and highbrow, in the areas of theatre, cinema, and television) have dominated, and quite taken over the cultural scene in Egypt. Art forms which rely solely on the written word have been considerably eclipsed. With the exception of Nagib Mahfouz, many of the novelists who flourished in the sixties have turned to other, more popular art forms. Consequently, the novel has been at a low ebb, and would have further declined, or

even completely disappeared had it not been for the persistence of a group of dedicated young novelists among whom we number Mohamed Galal.

Galal's early writings were essentially an expression of the writer's ideological commitment to the cause of the poor, the oppressed, and the socially exploited working classes. His novels, therefore, adopted the framework of social realism. Gradually, however, his thought and art matured, and grew more complex. Opression, the central theme in all his works, acquired new dimensions ; it no longer meant simply the oppression and exploitation of one social class by another. Rather it has come to imply all forms of oppression, social, political, moral, and existential.

In his early stage as a novelist, Galal was a faithful proselyte of social realism. Understandably, therefore, his novels dealt with social phenomena externally ; they documented the surface accurately, but failed to give the social reality depicted any symbolic implications or universal significance. When one reads **El-Tayeb Alley,** for instance, or **The Pavement** — two of his earliest novels — one feels that the writer is too engrossed in portraying the painful contradictions in society, and in defending the cause of the exploited classes to pay anything but cursory attention to character portrayal or to delve objectively into the psychological depths of his characters and lay bare their inner contradictions. In other words, in these early novels he seems to sacrifice psychological credibility to social accuracy. One reason for this is, perhaps, that, at this stage, Galal had not yet mastered his artistic tools ; another is that the intellectual atmosphere in Egypt at that time displayed a marked critical bias for social commitment, rather than artistic excellence. What mattered was not so much the excellence of form as the favourable social message.

Social realism in form and content, however, gave way in his following trilogy **(The Bars, The Cave,** and **The Illusion)** to a more comprehensive vision which embraced the movement of the Egyptian society as a whole in its long struggle for liberation. In the trilogy, the issue of class struggle no longer forms the central conflict in a one-dimensional narrative as it had done in the two earlier

novels referred to ; it becomes only one aspect of a complex conflict of forces social, historical and psychological, in a multi-dimensional narrative which enables the writer to draw fully-rounded characters and internalize the social conflict giving it a definite human focus. Thus, the trilogy portrays the conflict of many contradictory forces in the minds of individuals as they cope with social and historical changes. In other words in the trilogy, social realism which deals with man exclusively in his social capacity gives way to a kind of modern, more complex realism that consists primarily in psychological realism. that consists primarily in psychological realism. Galal, however, never loses sight of the complex interaction of the social, cultural, and human forces which enters into any human situation, and which forms the substance of the inner conflict of his characters.

An Accursed Woman and **Feminine Wiles** mark the beginning of the third stage of Galal's development as a novelist. In these two novels he discards the realistic method of narration which relies on a definite plot that unfolds in a chronological sequence of events based on the law of causality. He adopts the techniques of the modern novel in which past, present, and future overlap, and experiences merge in a continuum which forms psychological, or internal time. Logic, causality, and chronological order are replaced by a string of apparently disconnected, or haphazardly grouped intense moments, or epiphanies, which reveal the real meaning of the characters' experience and the full implications of the conflict experienced by the self in its relation to itself, to the others, and to society at large.

This new method of narration entailed the occasional use of what has come to be known as the «stream of consciousness» technique, i.e., the intense charging of a single moment of cosciousness with a myriad associations, individual and social, past and present. Another new technique Galal uses is that of the shifting, multiple point of view. The narrative no longer adopts a single angle of vision, that of the author as onmiscient narrator, but threads in and out of the various characters' minds, varying the point of view every time. The voice of the committed writer, dominant in the early realistic novels, fades out, and so does the objective, photographic pretence, or fallacy. We see the world the novel depicts through the

eyes and intense responses of many characters, or, rather, the world of the novel only exists in terms of the characters' conscousness of it. In other words, objective reality, social or otherwise, gives way to subjective reality.

The novels of this period, consequently, have a quality of immediacy, and urgency. They have also a strong dramatic flavour : the action begins in **medias res,** as Aristotle advised in connection with drama, and the characters are immediately revealed in crisis. By starting at the climax, and building higher, Galal takes a short cut to his central theme, avoiding a lot of the «preparation» that cluttered up his earlier novels and diluted their intensity. He is also able to maintain a relentlessly taut and highly economic narrative that rises swiftly in a crescendo of mounting suspense until the final conflagration — as is often the case.

The central theme that occupies Galal in the later novels is the victimization of man in the modern world. This theme is obviously a continuation, and a development, in more complex and comprehensive terms, of the theme of social oppression which engaged him in the earlier novels. The forces of victimization could still assume the guise of social, political, or moral oppression, but they are handled in such a way as to suggest an ineluctable mode of existence for modern man, a mode of which the dominant features are loneliness, impotence, and a sense of alienation and homelessness. The world the novels portray is one in which human relationships of all kinds, as well as the old values and faith have collapsed. It is a world from which certainty, harmony and contentment have long disappeared.

In **An Accused Woman** and **Feminine Wiles,** Galal tentatively tested and experimented with many techniques in trying to render his later maturer artistic vision ; they constitute a period of apprenticeship, so to speak. **Trial at Midnight** shows that he has mastered both his new tools and his material.

In **Trial at Midnight** the starting point is simple, and somewhat Strindbergian : Wafiq, the central character, comes out of prison to find that his wife had given birth to a son ; he suspects that the

child is not his own. This initial situation triggers off a series of events, mostly psychological, which develop to a climax of dramatic violence. Most of the narrative is rendered through the consciousness of the central character so that we come to identify with his point of view almost completely — almost, but not quite. For though the other characters exist only in so far as they relate to Wafiq's mental crisis, they do provide, through their reactions and states of consciousness, other perspectives which seem to contradict and conflict with the central one. Galal here shows little interest in portraying the external objective world in which his characters live, or their social milieu. He plunges directly into the minds of his characters to reveal in a series of highly charged «shots», in which the present merges into the past, their inner thoughts, longings, and agonizing fears and conflicts.

As in drama, irony plays a key role in this novel. The initial situation takes on an ironical twist when the hero's wife Fatahiyya, understandably, displays on his coming home after five years' absence a strong sexual passion. Rather than feel gratified by her eagerness, the hero becomes more suspicious. His doubts are further enhanced by his son's palpable, but, under the circumstances, quite expected aversion to him, and by the recurring memory of the insidious insinuations his mother had made when she visited him in prison, and which had sown the first seede of doubt in his mind. In other words, love is ironically inverted into a lethal trap that breeds an oppressive sense of betrayal, and the hero exchanges one kind of prison, the real, for another, the mental. The freedom he gains on his release turns into a worse and more excruciating kind of prison than the one he left. His doubts, fears, and memories crowd in upon him, like relentless walls fast closing in, until they drive him into a mad frenzy. His mind snaps and he kills his wife.

The central dramatic paradox on which the novelist builds his novel consists in a contrast between the physical freedom Wafiq attains and his spiritual desolation after his release. Wafiq shakes off the shackles of physical incarceration only to fall prey to a stifling and crushing sense of betrayal, exile, and moral degeneration.

Furthermore, Galal invests this central paradox with a sense of absurdity which accentuates it and gives it more depth. Until the

very end he omits to give the reader any clear and logical explanation for the hero's long imprisonment ; nor does he justify in any clear convincing terms the hero's present state of mind. It's as if the novel here, unlike **An Accursed Woman,** for example, where the coersion was primarily social seeks to suggest an existential coersion of the Kafkesque type. Indeed, at many points, **Trial at Midnight** brings to mind Kafka's **Trial.** Wafiq is arrested for no known reason, or, rather, for no reason at all except that he embraced a man in front of the university. Similarly, his wife Fatahiyya comes under suspicion and is killed for no greater offence than having given birth at the wrong time. And even his mother in law, Nahid, whom the police arrest and accuse of illegal sexual practices, is left until the end with a big question mark hanging over her. The novel ends before the verdict of the court is heard, and significantly, the question of her guilt or innocence remains unresolved until the end.

In this way Galal expands the significance of Wafiq's dilemma. His helpless suffering in the face of the inscrutable arbitrary forces that manipulate him is played in other keys, through other characters, until it becomes symbolic of man's uncertainty and victimization which only death can end. Through the deliberate air of mystery which envelops it, the individual tragedy of Wafiq becomes symbolic of the human condition ; it becomes an existential rather than a social experience, and absurdity becomes its keynote and permeating spirit.

From the very beginning Wafiq is marked as the tragic victim of unknown forces that work to destroy his mind and propel him on a fatal course. The grip relentlessly tightens. When the siege is complete, and the process of mental disintegration reaches its climax, the hero is left with no choice but violence. Murder becomes his only way out. Futile and senseless as it is, it is the only positive thing left for him to do, his only means of protesting against the absurdity of an incomprehensible coersive existence — at once a murder, a suicide, and an escape.

Wafiq's meaningless arrest and torture causes a deep crack in his mind. Not only does he feel himself the victim of vicious and

senseless oppression ; he is also corrupted. He is coersed into making a false confession, as we gather from vague snatches and quick flashbacks ; he also buys a little time off his prison term by betraying his friends. His own integrity mutilated, he can see nothing but corruption and betrayal everywhere. Consequently, when he is released he cannot regain his former peace of mind. He comes out obsessed and deformed into a strange world where he can no longer accommodate himself or establish meaningful relationships. The world outside the prison walls feels as coersive, hostile, and menacing as the world inside, and Galal further suggests that it is not only a question of a sick man's vision of the world, but that the world is, in truth, sick and frightening. This double meaning comes across vividly in the magnificent scene in Chapter Four where the people of the neighbourhood arrive to welcome Wafiq and end up besieging him on every side. They form a thick impenetrable human wall that threatens to stifle him. As the crowd swells, the anonymity of the faces that gape at him, of the hands that pull and push him, the bodies that press around him acquires a nightmarish quality, The crowd of well-wishers turns into a frightening mob that looks as if it had come to mutilate rather than cheer. The welcome turns into a physical and mental siege.

The state of siege is a central metaphor in the novel ; it develops in a rising crescendo until the tension reaches an unbearable pitch and a final explosion becomes invitable. The seven chapters which make up the novel move swiftly, at a breathless pace, and the well-controlled tempo generates a sense of inescapable doom. It is as if the hero had been enmeshed in a fast thickening web and he struggles and kicks in vain.

Apart from the central metaphor of the siege which is set in motion from the moment Wafiq gains his freedom, thus creating a terrible sense of irony, Galal invests some objects in the novel with certain associations and builds them up into eloquent metaphors which sum up his hero's conflicting states of mind and his divided consciousness. The dog and the bowl of salad are two such metaphors. The bowl of salad Wafiq prepares for himself when he comes home is — as he himself indentifies it — a symbol of freedom (his freedom to eat what he likes, at the simplest level). It also represents his intense longing to regain his former world and resume his

old way of life. Against the bowl of salad as a symbol of freedom Galal sets in opposition the black dog Wafiq's wife acquires after his arrest. Wafiq views the dog as an intruder and an object of terror ; he sees him as a devil, a rival, and a force of hatred. The dog casts a dark shadow over his home-coming, and becomes the focus of his agonizing sexual suspicions and sense of betrayal. The dog also embodies for him his son's undisguised aversion :

> «He contemplated the tail of the black dog ; it looked to him like the tail of the devil.
>
> «He guaranded me when I was all alone,» she said. But Wafiq still felt a strong urge to kick his black bloated belly, and his right foot twitched. Fatahiyya added, stressing her words ; «He'll get used to you in time my love.»
>
> Samih sat on the floor and scattered the sweets around him. One fell into the salad bowl. Wafiq picked it up and wiped it on his clothes. He held it close to the boy's mouth. After some hesitation the boy took it with his his hand ; but instead of putting it in his mouth, as his father had expected, he threw it away. Wafiq's nose quivered. Quickly Fatahiyya picked up the sweet and stuffed it in the boy's mouth.»

Small incidents like these, which Galal renders in quick shots, in an urgent telegraphic style, create for the reader Wafiq's intense sense of loss and betrayal.

Wafiq tries to regain his lost paradise by dwelling with his wife on the early memories of their stormy and passionate courtship. To Wafiq's disrupted and confused present, Galal successfully contrasts an idyllic past. The love memories create a poetic mood shot through by a deep sense of irretrievable loss. But the recaptured paradisal spots of time interchange with demonic moments. The harmonious poetic mood is constantly disrupted by the Satanic echoes of the voices of coersion — those of the interrogator and the jailer, Sergeant Omar. Every time Wafiq retrieves a meaning, or recaptures a healing image, the echoes storm through his mind causing a deep fissure, and the image blurs and fades away. As the voices persistently break in on the present, his efforts to escape into his harmonious pre-prison world come to grief :

«A bird sang ; a flower swayed ; a boy clung to a girl.
Sergeant Omar's voice squashed him. He felt it spouting out of his shoulder where Fatahiyya had touched him.»

As the memories of love cease to suggest harmony and integration and begin to link up with and evoke the momories of the cell, Wafiq becomes hopelessly isolated and cut off from any healing human contact : the only route of escape left him is completely blocked. He misinterprets his wife's passionate nature as evidence of fickleness and the absence of sexual restraint, and regards her ardent desire for him as a sign of innate depravity. The sexual union she craves becomes for him a symbol of debauchery rather than the union of two lovers.

In his mind the bedroom fades out into the cell :

«Open the door Fatahiyya ! Open the door !»

He found the door unlocked. He went out. They had opened the prison gates and let him out into a sunless day.»

Rather than heal him, Fathiyya's passion turns into a scorpion that preys on his mind and poisons his thoughts. Ironically, her love becomes part of the fast tightening siege. Consequently, the wide world he is released into shrinks to the size of a cell.

Another object which Galal invests with metaphoric value is Fatahiyya's unfinished partrait. The portrait which Wafiq starts before his arrest and fails to finish after his release is charged with meaning and becomes a metaphor for the loss of freedom, love, and creativity. It is, to use Eliot's term, the objective correlative of this feeling of total loss. In other words, the portrait is a symbol of a promise that never came true, the promise of liberation through rebellion which wafiq shies away from the night he is arrested. Fatahiyya tries to recreate for him the missed opportunity. the moment of challenge, but fails. Ironically, by refusing to ally himself with the arch-rebel, and free himself from the opression of the inherited metaphysical shackles, Wafiq inevitably becomes a fallen Adam. Cowardice is a stigma that seems to stick to Wafiq throughout the novel. Fatahiyya mentions it playfully, and Nahid

says it emphatically. Galal here, i.e., in his handling of the night of Wafiq's arrest, seems to equate political and religious oppression, stressing that submissiveness to the one entails coersion by the other.

On the other hand, the unfinished portrait represents for Wafiq, on a more immediately available level, Fatahiyya's broken promise, as he thinks, and all his dark suspicions. It embodies his feelings about her. Like the portrait of Dorian Grey in Oscar Wilde's famous novel, the portrait seems to materially change its aspect in Wafiq's eyes ; it subconsciously reflects for him all the sins he consciously attributes to her. This is why he often feels an urge to destroy it. But because he never reaches certainty either way, he fails to do so.

«He wanted to tear it up. But his hands would not move.»

Wafiq's mental siege reaches its climax in the crowd scene in chapter Four which, as I mentioned earlier, is built on the paradox of a welcoming reception turning into a mobbing, i.e,, on a blessing turning into a curse. In its senselessness and abusrdity, the scene parallels Wafiq's senseless arrest. Like the mysterious, polite and friendly agent of the police, the mobbing crowd start by being friendly but quickly turn into agents of victimization. What is important, however, is the fact that in both cases Wafiq falls a helpless prey to oppression after running away from a challenge posed by Fatahiyya both to his creativity and his manhood. In both cases Wafiq proves a coward and is suitably punished. In both cases too, the grim absurdity of a friendly police agent and a crowd of friends turning into a mob suggests something of the spirit of the old, senseless, merciless Greek gods, or of the tyrannical Jehova of the Old Testament. In the novel, Dawlat comes to his rescue ; she steps in to snatch him from the jaws of the mob.

Dawlat plays an important part in the novel. On the one hand she stands for the idea of faithful love and the untroubled golden past. On the other, she replays Wafiq's fall through cowardice and betrayal, and his quest for integration. Fisrt unconsciously, then deliberately, she sets about smearing Fatahiyya's honour and

deepening Wafiq's suspicions. She sneaks into her house and spiritually usurps her place.

Like Wafiq, she harks back to the past, as to a paradise lost that she cannot regain in the present. The past in which she and Wafiq lived in a state of pre-Fall innocence — symbolized by her unashamed nakedness (she posed for him in the nude) is equally irretrievable for her even though she finally succeeds in sleeping with the man she loves. In Wafiq's tainted present, his after the Fall existence, Dawlat's nakedness becomes a sexual snare, and deepens his sense of the fall. Like Adam sex becomes for him a shameful act that he commits in the dark, in a violent frenzy, and soon tries to forget. After he sleeps with Dawlat in the shuttered studio, he quickly leaves the room, and the flat, without so much as saying a word to her, as if fleeing. After that, Dawlat seems to merge into Fatahiyya. This is underlined in the scene where she invades Fatahiyya's room, stands before her mirror, and uses her make-up. It is as if she was donning Fatahiyya's face, as if she and Fatahiyya have become identified with each other in Wafiq's mind. And so, rather than act as a foil for Fatahiyya, or as a liberating force, Dawlat, ironically, bolsters up the hostile siege.

The metaphor of the siege worked out in the novel in the manner I have hastily sketched above turns Wafiq into a symbol of modern man's depleted existence which is dominated by loneliness, aggression, and failure. The long chapter which ends the novel, Chapter Seven, constitutes the dramatic climax of the book. Here the thematic threads that have been carefully laid out and devloped in the preceding chapters meet and interlock. The Chapter is presented through the consciousness of the four main characters (Wafiq, Fatahiyya, Nahid, and Dawlat). The tempo of this last day is ominously fast and breathless. The day is cleverly divided into stages marked by the hours, which gives an illusion of a ticking clock that brings us with mounting tension nearer the breaking point and the final act of murder. As the hours tick away, the rope tightens round the neck of the hero and his victim.

Galal in this chapter quickens the pace of the narrative and propels his hero on his fateful course by a series of dramatic discoveries

These discoveries at once deepen his sense of the absurdity of life and clarify to the reader, and to the hero as well, certain issues that have been deliberatly left vague so far or cryptically hinted at. The first issue is that of Wafiq's arrest. For the first time in the novel we meet the mysterious man on whose account Wafiq was arrested, and we definitely learn that Wafiq was jailed because he had embraced this man who was suspected of working against the regime. The real and absurdly shattering discovery, however, is that rather than work against the regime, this man is one of its lackeys, or, at least, close to it. This becomes clear when he declares that he has «good contacts in the right places», and offers to help Wafiq find out the real cause of his arrest. Consequently, the absurdity, and the mystery of Wafiq's arrest is deepened rather than unraveled. It would have comforted Wafiq to have learnt that the man who had involuntarily caused his suffering was a true rebel, a patriot, and a man with a cause. Instead, he discovers that he had suffered for nothing, that it had all been a senseless mistake that cost him the best years of his life.

In this chapter Wafiq also finds out about the charge against his mother in law, Nahid. He condemns her in his mind because the people of the neighbourhood object to the way she dresses, and because Dawlat had called her sinful. Naturally, When Fatahiyya finally summons up enough courage, at her mother's instigation, to bring up the subject, it is too late. She finds that he had already made up his mind as to the verdict. The irony of Wafiq's attiude is quite obvious : like his persecutors, he judges by appearances and hearsay, and condemns a person without real evidence, on the strength of suspicion and a mere picture in a newspaper. Galal deliberately withholds the truth about Nahid to underline this irony. But Wafiq's belated discovery of the scandal makes him identify the mother with the daughter : in his mind Fatahiyya becomes Nahid, thanks to her cowardice and long reticence, as well as to Dawlat's viciously misleading remarks. At this moment, and with terrible irony, Wafiq reaches the moment of decision, the decision to rebel which Fatahiyya had earlier talked about and urged him to make. But the decision here entails murder.

The discovery about his arrest and about his mother in law

deepens Wafiq's sense of betrayal. He feels that his world is cluttered with sin and faithlessness — as if they had becomes the law that govern existence. The big question that troubles him is why ? If he, despite his disturbed mental state, had found an answer, he would have been saved. He would have seen the logic of things. But as it is, he rushes into murder, and does the only sensible thing he can think of in his madness, which is to destroy himself and his senseless world with one blow.

The senselessness of life is built into the fabric of the novel. Whether man rebels or remains submissive, he is bound to fall. There are no answers, no explanations, no justifications, the author seems to say. If there were, his hero would have found them and achieved integration. The old system of values which had made sense of human existence has completely collapsed and nothing has taken its place except doubt and aggression. Certainty is man's means of salvation. Wafiq's tragedy is that he can never know, never be certain of anything. He is a victim ; neither he nor we know why. Betrayal and coersion crystallize as the two dominant feelings in modern man's consciousness. They generate a sense of chaos and colossal destruction. Desperately groping for the logic behind the inscrutable events, for some sort of consolation, Wafiq screams his impotent agony at the man who causes his arrest, and is only answered by the silence :

«I can sleep no more !

— ....

The brush shakes in my hand !

— ....

The colours merge in my eyes !

— ....

My head is stuffed with filth !

— ....

My wife has been unfaithful to me !

— ....

My son isn't my son !

Life does not yield any answers and holds little comfort. Murder becomes Wafiq's last resort, and the rising crescendo of this chapter reaches the point of explosion with the gun shots.

Trial at Midnight constitutes a real contribution to the Egyptian novel and a valuable addition to Galal's work as a fiction-writer. With admirable patience and amazing persistence and tenacity he has come a long way. He has mastered the techniques and dramatic form of the modern novel, and expanded his vision to embrace the existential crisis of modern man.

SAMIR SARHAN

TRIAL AT MIDNIGHT

A NOVEL

«Shut the door behind you,» Wafiq called after her as she departed. He was chopping onions for the salad.

Tears were gathering in his eyes ; he wiped them with the back of his hand and repeated his request.

Fatahiyya had heard their son screaming in the sitting room, where they had left him playing, and was rushing out to fetch him. She soon came back holding him in her arms. He reached out to his father.

«Sweets, Wafiq ?» he piped.

«No», replied the father without looking up, «they're onions, love».

«We've run out of sweets. Wafiq will buy you some when he goes out,» said the mother soothingly. «You can never have enough, can you ?» she added, cupping his head in her palm. «He'll have to buy you a whole sweet shop !»

But Samih kept on whining for sweets.

«He won't give us a momen's peace now,» the mother commented happily.

The father looked at his son and recognized in the little face the mother's eyes.

«I'll buy you sweets after you eat,» he promised.

But the child, still in his mother's arms, beat the air with his fists and kicked angrily as if he was hitting at his father.
«Sweets Wafiq.»

« You don't know him,» Fatahiyya said, her face glowing, «He's pig-headed.»

«Takes after his mother,» Wafiq murmured.

«Well ! If I were really pig headed ..,» she stopped as if she had changed her mind about finishing her sentence. Instead, she gave her son a passionate kiss and said soothingly :

«Don't get upset ; I'll go out and buy you what you want. Are you pig-headed like your mother ? Tell dady that your mother isn't pig-headed .»

The child seemed to melt completely in her embrace.

«You'll stand up for your mother Samih, won't you ?» she added.

Wafiq had finished chopping the onions and started sqeezing them to bring out the juice. It looked as if he was squeezing his own heart !

«He always clings to me as if someone was going to snatch him away,» she said as she touched her make-up in front of the mirror. «It'll take sometime for him to get used to your being around.»

He looked up. He wanted to see her holding his son ; but she had left. It seemed to him that he had deliberately delayed lifting his head and waited until the door was closed before he looked up. He heaved a sigh. He always felt relieved when he was alone.

«You don't know him.»

Fatahiyya's remark echoed in his empty soul.

He remembered. He was in prison when the boy was born. His mother gave him the news across the bars.

«You became a father after you went inside,» she had said.

His face had clouded over, or may be it hadn't. He didn't know. Probably it hadn't. Most likely he had given her a smile — a still-born smile. His mother had smiled through her tears. He had wanted a son, of his own flesh and blood. Fatahiyya had written to say : «You are now a father». But he hadn't felt anything, anything

he could recognize. He had wept without tears. His cell-mate had asked him what was ailing him and he had felt ashamed of his unshed tears.

«I suppose I am just home-sick,» he had murmured, holding the news from the only friend he had inside the prison walls.

He started swinging his foot. He had expected life to have stopped in her veins, as it had stopped for him. She had called the boy Samih.

«It'll take sometime for him to get used to your being around.»

He nearly groaned as he repeated the words she has thrown at him before she left. He would have liked to snatch him from her arms, to scream in his face : «I am your father, you son of a ...» No matter how many boxes of sweets he bought him, he still refused to produce from his lips the word «father».

He felt a vague sense of alarm. He realized that the black dog was rubbing himself against him. He gazed at him. He thought that one day that dog would seize his chance and sink his teeth into his throat.

«If treason is proved, you will have to pay for it with your neck,» sergeant Omar had declared.

«Delicious,» Fatahiyya exclaimed as she sampled the salad her husband had prepared.

Wafiq was about to say : «I don't want any dogs around,» but chewed his words.

«I haven't tasted it since you left,» she said, giving him a lightning kiss.

He contemplated the tail of the black dog ; it seemed very much like the tail of the devil.

«He guarded me when I was all alone,» she said, as if she had read his mind.

But Wafiq still felt an overwhelming urge to kick the black bloated belly, and his right foot itched.

«He'll get used to you in time my love», Fatahiyya added, stressing her words.

Samih plumped to the floor scattering the sweets around him. He dropped one into the salad bowl. Wafiq picked it up and wiped it on his clothes. He held it close to the boy's mouth. After some hesitation, the boy took it with his hand ; but instead of putting it in his mouth as his father had expected, he threw it away. Wafiq's nose quivered. Quickly Fatahiyya picked up the sweet and stuffed it into the boy's mouth. When he started chewing it passively Wafiq laughed.

«Naughty boy,» Fatahiyya chided with a smile. «Don't say like his mother !» she quickly added. Wafiq's laughter swelled and rang with vitality.

She tingled with girlish joy.

«I haven't heard you laugh since you came back,» she said.

«I have had to keep my laughter hidden away where they could not reach it.»

«No one can touch you now», she said reassuringly as she ruffled his hair.

He jerked his head away, or thought he did, and started stirring the salad in the bowl with his fingers, adding a large amount of chillies. He remembered how sergeant Omar used to laugh — a stupid guffaw that always seemed to rock the prison walls. Now every time he heard someone laugh he was reminded of sergeant Omar's boisterous laugh. He longed to ask : «Do I sound like sergeant Omar when I laugh ?» His eyes strayed to the window panes. They looked grimy.

«This salad is hot ! It's burning ! » Fatahiyya cried.

He scratched his forehead and his fingers which had handled the chillies accidentally touched his eyes. They burned with a searing pain. Knocks were heard on the door.

«It must be Mitwalli,» he said, his eyes still closed.

She smacked her lips in relish at the taste of the salad while Wafiq, fighting the burning pain in his eyes, repeated :

«Let my brother in.»

As she made for the door she remembered her mother. Could it be her at the door ? She wouldn't want to let her in. But how could her mother know ? Who could have told her ? She had kept the news of his release a close secret. She suddenly turned back and headed for the bedroom.

«How could I let him in ? I am half naked !» she said reproachfully .

She found something to wear over the nightgown and moved heavily to the door. She paused a while before opening it. When she did, whoever it was had gone.

«Mitwalli indeed ! » she said loudly in angry tones. «You think he would come here ? You must be dreaming !» she added taunting him with his family's shameful neglect of her.

He braved the searing pain and opened his eyes. He looked towards the door thinking she had been fooling. He expected to see his brother walk through the door. He hadn't seen him since his release, two days ago. Two whole days had already passed. His eyes hung to the door for a while, but no Mitwalli came in. Instead, Fatahiyya marched in looking sullen, and grimly wrenched off her dressing gown ; she did this so violently that he nearly thought she meant to remove her nightgown as well.

«May be he doesn't know that I am out,» he said timidly, avoiring her eyes.

«I left word with his servant.»

«Perhaps the servant forgot to tell him.»

The boy had closed his fingers tightly on a handful of salad. She swooped down on him, siezed his wrist and shook it vigorously to make him drop the salad.

«You little donkey ! Do you want to die ? It's burning hot !» Wafiq smiled pensively. He wanted to tell her :

«Better for him to know the taste of burning pain now than have it come as a shock in the future.»

The boy had diverted her thoughts from his family : he was relieved. He said to himself :

«She took her time opening the door. Mitwalli must have concluded that there was no one in and left.»

«You are too innocent,» she blurted as she carried the boy to the sink to wash his hands.

He frowned. His mother had often told him : «You are too gullible.»

Her voice blended with the sound of water rushing from the tap.

«It was your innocence that landed you in prison.»

A thin spray of water sprinkled him. He felt sweetly refreshed.

At the inquiry he had been asked :

«What do you know about the man who embraced you in front of the university ?»

«Nothing,» he had replied.

«What is his name ? »

«I don't remember.»

«You mean to tell me that you embraced a total stranger ? A man whose name you don't even remember !»

He remembered how the interrogator had looked at him — a look that had spelt the word «gullible». He expected to hear Fatahiyya say «You're gullible.» He closed his eyes. His head swam.

«You think Mitwalli would come ?» she asked.

He wanted to ask her in return :

«Did the interrogator ever tell you your husband was gullible ?» Instead, he replied :

«It sounded like him.»

«None of your family has asked about me or looked me up since you left,» she retorted in melancholy tones. «No one cares nowadays. It's everyone for himself.»

She would have said more, but she swallowed her words. She only added :

«Wake up Sir ! You don't get to learn about life by shutting yourself up in a studio and painting.»

Seeing that his mother wasn't looking, the boy furtivley dipped his hand once more into the salad bowl. She jerked his hand sharply away from it. The harsh movement made the boy cry. The man felt annoyed ; he snatched the boy out of her arms and hugged him tenderly, patting him and wiping away his tears. Samih started fidgeting. Wafiq realised that he felt restless and uncomfortable in his arms. Fatahiyya sensed her husband's growing irrigation and quickly remarked :

«Kindness doesn't always work with him. One has to be firm sometimes.»

Wafiq gazed at the appetizing dish. Fatahiyya thought that her unkind allusion to his family might have upset him ; she asked soothingly.

«You really hink the servant might have forgotten to tell Mitwalli ?»

The boy jumped into his mother's arms. Wafiq smiled wanly, and mentally said : «You do deserve a beating, you little brat !»

«He never leaves me,» the mother said, nearly bragging.

Wafiq picked up the salad bowl and ran out. He didn't want to discuss Mitwalli. She laughed and followed him out of the kitchen into the sitting room. He deposited the bowl on the floor and sat down facing it, nearly hugging it.

«Are you going to eat on the floor ?» she asked incredulously.

He wanted desperately not to look into her eyes.

«Let us sit at the table,» she cajoled.

For a moment it seemed to him that the woman standing opposite him wasn't the same girl he had married, not the girl in school uniform he had met one morning in Sayyida Zaynab Square and had at once pointed at saying : «This is my wife.» He looked up at her rosy cheeks as she stood there warning :

«Mitwalli might call.»

«I'll still eat on the floor,» he said mulishly.

«What are you saying Wafiq ? »

He burst out :

«Inside, there, I often dreamt ... often ... of sitting on this very floor, in this very room, of having a salad bowl right in front of me like this, and of eating, and eating ...» He wanted to say «until I died,» but he swallowed the words.

«But Mitwalli might come,» she argued obstinately.

He nearly shouted «let Mitwalli go to hell,» but held his tongue in time and bent his head. He seemed to be staring at the salad.

«You must have been dying for a bowl of salad,» she mocked him gently.

«Freedom is a bowl of salad.»

His eyes hurt. He closed them and said with fervour :

«You don't know what it means not to be able to sit on the floor of your own room hugging a dish of onions, lemons, and chillies ! »

He felt the tears rush into his eyes. It wasn't the onion. He shuddered. He didn't want her to see his weakness. He opened his eyes and found the room deserted. He needed to hug his child. Fatahiyya came back carrying the food.

«Where is Samih ?» he asked.

«Asleep. Now we can have some peace.»

He emitted a short laugh and devoured a great quantity of salad ; he enjoyed the fire that blazed in his mouth afterwards.

«Something with a definite taste at last,» he murmured contentedly.

Fatahiyya saw that his eyes had gone red. She lifted one edge of her nightgown, placed it on one of his eyes, and started to blow on it as if to cool it.

«It's all right little one,» she cooed.

Her fingers ran gently over his face and through his hair.

«This is how my mother used to do with my father. She taught me how to cool my husband's eyes.»

He recoiled at this, but she continued to blow.

«Your eyes are red, as if you want to eat me. Are you going to devour me Wafiq ? Is that what you want to do ?»

She seemed suddenly to lose her balance and nearly fell. He held her in his arms to protect her. As if she had been waiting for this chance, she started showering him with her kisses. He was taken aback and froze. But her moans and sighs engulfed him.

«All those cold nights, the cursed cold nights. How they gnawed at my bones !»

Her ardour thawed him, and together they flowed onto the floor of the room where they had often spent the long winter evenings by the fire. She knocked over the bowl spilling the salad on the carpet.

«Damn you,» he said in a voice that betrayed his total surrender. «Freedom has spilt on the carpet.»

In a soundless voice, like the fire that used to silently flare and glow in the well-stocked fire-place, when their nights were warm, she responded.

The door of the room had swung open. In raging fury, the big black dog bolted into the room and headed for his neck. He sprang to his feet in panic. Fatahiyya dissolved in laughter.

«He's jealous !» she exclaimed looking elated. «I thought I had locked him up,» she added.

She was about to return the dog to his confinement, but Wafiq started hastily putting on his clothes.

«What a vicious dog !» he broke out indignantly as he glanced at the overturned salad bowl.

He walked beside her, in her shadow, clining to her. She held his hand. He felt the prison walls closing in, bearing down on his chest. The sergeant's voice blared :

«Those who know how to keep silent, know how to commit a crime.»

He saw himself running, his hands cuffed. The sergeant's voice wound its long, drawling, thick notes round hid throat :

«They know how to commit a crime, and how to escape the hangman's rope. You too will escape it, I swear by my mother's grave.»

In the vast university gardens his shoulder knocked against hers accidentally. He breathed deeply and muttered :
«I am tired».

Fatahiyya didn't seem to hear him. She swayed ecstatically.

«The greenness sparkless with the breath of lovers ... Your own words. Don't you remember ? I know them by heart.,» she said.

Her long tresses blew about her face. They seemed to be winding themselves round his neck. He shrank away.

«It's exactly the same. Just as it looked that morning. I remember it perfectly. You came, and were carrying the morning paper in your right hand. You were wearing the tie I had chosen for you, weren't you ?» And shaking him gently by the shoulder, she added, «and the painting ! Ah ! That portrait which ...»

She didn't like the absent look in his eyes. She stopped him and stood facing him.

«You were coming to finish the portrait,» she continued, «my portrait sitting in the flowers. I was like a flower myself, wasn't I Wafiq ? You never finished it. Where is it now ? You must have tucked it away some place, you devil. I locked for it everywhere ... when I was .. But I never found it.»

A bird sang ; a flower swayed ; a boy clung to a girl.

Sergeant Omar's voice squashed him. He felt it spouting out of his shoulder where Fatahiyya had touched him.

«That portrait is my well-deserved reward. You won't cheat me out of it. »

«That portrait is my well-deserved reward. You won't cheat me had often thought that one day he would wake up and find the eyes swallowed up in the quivering bags of fat. He remembered how his thick hand had gripped his shoulder as he said :

«Even if you could elude the others, you will never slip out of my clutches. No one ever escapes from sergeant Omar's hands.»

He glanced at Fatahiyya's tapering fingers and pointed nails. He smiled. His smile thrilled her. She seemed to forget her question. She walkd by his side wallowing, her steps rolling, in the spring fragrance that embraced them.

«It's axctly the same as it was that morning,» she wispered, as if to herself.

He snatched her fingers and kissed them.

«The morning you came to me Wafiq.»

She screwed up her eyes as if to concentrate on the memory. «Your eyes were so eager. You wanted to carry me of and fly away.»

He stared right through her. He saw himself walking into the university that morning. Had he been eager or hesitant ? He couldn't remember now. But he remembered that he had spent the night befor gazing at the sky. It had been a starless night. His father had objected to his marriage, had sworn he would divorce his wife and bring the house down about their ears if his son dared defy him. He had heard his mother crying, or thought he had. He had loved her. He had listened hard, but had only heard his father's loud snoring. He had tried to stop his ears. He couldn't bear to know that his mother was crying. He had run to her bed, and his foot had knocked against something in the dark. His father had stirred in his bed, and he had quickly drawn back. However, he had made sure that his mother was not crying.

«You wanted to carry me off and fly away,» Fatahiyya dreamily said. «It was as if something was chasing you, was trying to take me away from you.»

Effortlessly he remembered that he had risen early that morning, before sunrise, and got dressed. But that day the sun hadn't risen. He had gone to the river and stood there for a long time looking at it. But he hadn't been able to recognize his old familiar Nile. He had turned his back on it, on the university ; he had walked heavily away, bought a newspaper, and kept it folded in his hand. His feet had throbbed as he approached the tree where she usually sat with her friend Miriam. Fatahiyya's breath had clung to his nostrils. «Let the earth collapse and everyone on it perish,» he had thought, but he would do it. But he hadn't found Fatahiyya there, in the folds of the tree ; his heart had nearly stopped.

«The tree hasn't changed,» Fatahiyya trilled, handing him a flower. As he took the flower, her fingers slowly twined themselves round his. He wished to say : «It hasn't lost its vigour.»

He sat down in the shade of the old tree and felt as if time hadn't moved since they sat there last. H caught a glimpse of her petticoat as she sat down ; he bent his head. He felt shy, as if she wasn't his wife, and averted his eyes.

«Do you love me ? Do you love Wafiq ?» Fatahiyya asked. «You know Miriam, my friend ? The blonde who used to sit here on my left, remember her ? When she saw you coming she said : «Wafiq looks absolutely grim. Must have read the announcement of your engagement in the morning papers. He is holding one in his hand. I'll slap him before he sits down,» she said, «I'll slap him so hard, it'll wake him up and make him realize what he has lost.» But I wouldn't let her. I begged her not to. I said ...»

«You said ?» urged Wafiq, contemplating the flower.

«I said Wafiq is innocent. He is kind.»

She snatched the flower from his fingers and put it to her lips.

«I wouldn't let you be knocked down,» she said with a clear tinkling laugh. «My eyes embraced you and held you up. You

said «I wish you joy Fatahiyya.» She looked up at him. He looked tall as he towared above her. Fingering the flower she repeated : «You said 'I wish joy Fatahiyya'.» She remembered the fury that had raged inside her then.

«I don't know how it started. Something inside me snapped. I was mad. But I knew we were inseperable, like the two halves of an apple.» She burst out indignantly : «Why didn't you tear the paper ? Why didn't you scream at me ? Why didn't you say You're mine Fatahiyya ! No one can take you away from me ! You were a coward.»

She suddenly realized how angrily she had spoken, and laughed. She added hastily, trying to soften the effect of her insulting remark : «You were a coward my little one.» Her laughter rang out as she stretched herself on the green grass. «This is how I used to sit here. I remember perfectly. No. No ! Don't sit there. Over here, where you used to. I want to recreate the past, to live it once more.»

«I was a coward,» wafiq murmured.

She pressed his hand. «My love isn't a coward,» she whispered.

Mentally, he said : «I confessed. I told the interrogator all that he wanted to hear.»

«You were brave», Fatah'yya tensely urged. «You said you loved me. You said you wanted to marry me.»

He felt totally crushed, obliterated.

«I didn't,» he obstinately declared.

Her heart sank. «You did say you loved me. You said you wanted ...» She stopped and gripped his hand violently : «But you never asked me why I accepted another man ! Why didn't you hit me ? I expected your hand to come down on my face. But you only said «congratulations» ! You didn't mean it, I know. But you said it all the same. «I wish you joy Fatahiyya,» she mimicked sneeringly. She dropped his hand. «You hadn't slept all night. I knew it when I saw you that day. I could see it in your eyes.»

«I used to run away from my studio and come to you,» he blurted out.

She rolled on the grass, pressing the ground with her soft warm body, and laughed ecstatically.

«When we were hungry we fed on words of love,» she said.

«And wherever we went we were besieged by people's eyes.»

«As if we were doing something wrong !»

«But now nobody knows anybody,» he said, and was going to add, «even I don't know myself, not anymore, but he chewed his words.

«But I know you,» she said coquettishly. «I remember exactly how you looked. Your dark eyes, your commanding look, your upright figure, straight like an arrow aimed against the times.»

« You have a good memory,» he said dryly.

«You've never been away from me, not for a minute,» she said dreamily, closing her eyes. She breathed deeply and added : «I always want to relive that day, when you barged into our house and took me away. We walked out side by side. I was so proud of my knight !»

«It looked as if they had expected it,» he said rather regretfully.

«It was the anniversary of our love,» she said eagerly, flinging out her arms. «I shouted, «open the doors to receive my love. It's our anniversary. Let him in.» They cowered. They were afraid, and opened the doors. and you were there on time.» She sprang to her feet, and stood tall and graceful. She drew him to her, and cried : «How we ran that day !» She started running, pulling him along. He wanted to run, but his feet felt heavy and clumsy. He felt impotent.

«Our anniversary has to be a cheerful one,» she said.

He remembered how she had looked as a law student. He had once picked a flower and slipped it down her chest. He picked a flower and held it near her chest.

«They haven't devoured your memory over there,» she exclaimed in thrilled tones, trembling. She snatched the flower and slipped it down her chest then kissed him passionately. He started and said apprehensively :

«There are people around ...»

«People ? Ignore them.»

He looked at her searchingly. He noticed for the first time since his release that her breasts had matured. He remembered that the night before she had lain naked in his arms and a quiver ran through him.

«People ... people ! What people ?» She exclaimed in exasperation.

He felt weak and impotent. He flung himself down on a wooden seat.

«They have robbed you ...» Fatahiyya started to say,
Their eyes met. For a moment he felt that she was a stranger. She didn't finish her sentence.

«We hired a boat on the Nile that day, remember ?» She said, fingering his palm.

«We've done enough for today.»

«But I promised myself this treat,» she expostulated, unable to contain her exuberance.

He walked beside her helplessly.

«People are looking at us, as if they ...» Her eyes danced happily. «The water looks so refreshing !»

He gazed in the direction of the boats.

«You like sailing on the Nile.»

«I haven't been on the Nile since you left.»

«But you have been to the sea.»

«The sea ?»

«Alexandria,» he said, tears welling up in his eyes.

«Ah, that was in the past, when I was a schoolgirl.»

He gave her a piercing look, but soon withdrew his eyes. He had been doing this often since he came out. He had come to fear her. He could always look through to the heart of things.

«You went to Alexandria,» he said accusingly.

«Alex ? Oh, yes. Now I remember. I went there the summer they took you away. My mother insisted.» He turned his face away. «I told you about it when I came to see you,» she added anxiously.

«You had every right to go.»

«And I told you about it.»

«I couldn't stop you living. I was in prison. You were free.»

She picked up his hand. The sun hurt his eyes.

«Wafiq,» she implored.

«..............»

«You're angry with me.»

He opened his eyes. «I couldn't very well expect you to become a hermit. It wouldn't have been fair.»

«I wasn't alone there. I went with my mother.»

He remembered something the interrogator had said when he questioned him for the second time. He had said :

«Your lovely wife is whiling away the time by the sea.»

«I was with my mother.» Her heart pounded. Her mother had been accused of trading in vice and arrested while he was in prison. She had kept the news from him.

Half way across the Nile she stopped the little boat. «Are you still angry ?» she asked.

«Why should I be angry ?»

«I shouldn't have gone, I know. It was wrong.» she admitted guiltily, lowering her head. She let go of her oar. The boat rocked gently on the water.

«Why should a prisoner get angry if his woman goes bathing ?» he asked idly as he splashed about in the water with his hand sending up showers of spray. He would have added «and gives all and sundry the pleasure of seeing her half naked ?». Instead, he said, «It wouldn't be fair.»

A big wave rocked the boat. She held his hand.

«Wafiq,» she whispered.

«Don't let apologies spoil your treat,» he said with a smile.

«You won't be angry any more ?»

His eyes wandered absently as he replied :

«In there, they taught me never to be angry.» He wished the boat would stop, would capsize, would sink to the bottom. She grasped his hand and he felt her warm fingers pressing it. He suddenly seemed to recognize her and murmured : «Fatahiyya.»
«Wafiq.»

Chapter 111

Wafiq woke up but kept his eyes closed. Fatahiyya's naked image pressed against his lids. She had burst into tears while she lay in his arms. She had ruined something, he had been hoping for. He fidgeted.

Had the moonlight betrayed his feelings to her ? He had wanted to wipe away her tears, but had also relished the thought of her cleansing herself. It was right that she should cry, he had felt. The moon had crumbled in the window. He had smoothed her long hair and recognized the old feel of it. How often had he rested in its shade ? He had lain there dreading her confession. She would stop crying and blurt out something she had hidden, something that would shatter the quiet of the dawn and explode the sleeping house into a shower of flying glass. He had shaded his eyes and she hadn't seen the dim tears that stood there. His tears ? Hers ? Wafiq had waited. He had fallen asleep waiting.

Wafiq turned in his bed. Her naked image still lingered in his eyes. He felt hot under the covers. He wanted to kick them away, but didn't want her to discover that he was awake, for then she would start smothering him with her kisses. He hated her kisses in the morning ; they semed to rip something open.

The interrogator's voice boomed in his head, shaking him like an earth-tremour : «You have an attractive wife. Aren't you afraid someone might seduce her ?»

He had wanted to slap his face. Why hadn't he ? He thought about it. Had it been paralysis ? Stupor ? Or both ? Probably both.

He kicked the covers away and slipped off the bed. His head accidentally knocked against one of the edges and he pressed his hand to where it hurt. He was surprised not to find her hand there before his, as he had expected. He turned his head and looked

for her. In her usual place on the bed, he saw her nightgown. Bits of her underwear were scattered everywhere. He quickly withdrew his eyes from the scene. He didn't want to look. The door was shut. He felt there was some kind of connection between the closed door and the scattered underwear. His eyes reverted to the flimsy bits. His hand slowly stretched towards them. He wanted to hold something of hers. But his hand trembled and retreated. He lit a cigarette and inhaled the smoke. He coughed violently. The doctor had ordered him to give it up. His head slid forward as he sat on the edge of the bed and he half expected to find her there, to prop, his head on her breasts and hold him in her arms. His eyes travelled heavily round the room looking for her. It suddenly struck him that he wasn't in his own bedroom.

«Fatahiyya ! Fatahiyya !» he called out in panic.

There was no reply. Apprehensively he waited for a cold official voice to ask why he was sitting on the edge of the bed. He waited, but it didn't come. He laughed nervously, jerkily, as if something was obstructing his laughter.

He realized that Fatahiyya had got rid of all his furniture — the furniture he had patiently accumulated over the years. He would spend a whole night over a painting, sell it in the morning, and buy a piece of furniture for the bedroom. He gazed round at the new furniture. It oppressed him. He kicked a chair and a weight slid off his chest. He wanted to run away. He would put on his clothes and go to his mother. He wanted to bury his head in her comfortable bosom.

He couldn't find his shirt. Relieved at having found an excuse to give vent to his anger, he called out indignantly :

«Fatahiyya ! Where the hell is my shirt ?»

There was only the silence. He nodded his head slowly as he intoned : «You have an attractive wife. Aren't you afraid someone might seduce her ?» He addressed his words to the interrogator while he scrutinized his face which was increasingly becoming blurred and featureless in his mind.

He sat twisting and wringing his hands. The door was locked. He would break it down.

«Open the door Fatahiyya ! Open the door !» he screamed as he pulled at the handle. It obeyed him. The door hadn't been locked, he realized. He went out.

He remembered how they had opened the prison gates and let him out into a sunless day.

A thought struck terror in his heart : he would find his woman in the next room, lying on the floor, naked. He made his way towards it gingerly, as if he was stepping into the hangman's quarters.

On the floor of the sitting room, like the sad remains of a battle, the toys and sweets he had bought his son were strewn and jumbled.

«Samih !» he called.

He wanted his son, wanted to hug him, to dissolve completely into the innocent trickle of his laughter.

«I have sent Samih away to my mother,» he suddenly remembered she had told him while they were lying in bed.

He felt all his anger gather in his fists.

«I want you all to myself,» she had added ; «I want to make up for all the lonely nights I spent waiting for you.»

Her eyes had sparkled in the moonlight as she said :

«I kept expecting to find you in my arms. I kept imagining that you would break down the prison walls.»

His fingers closed on some of his child's things and a rush of happiness flooded him. To hug his son ! To squeeze him in his arms ! To drink his tears and eat his cries !

The face of the old jailer loomed large and filled his mind.

«Congratulations. You are a father now.»

The features soon faded and dissolved into those of the interrogator. They grew larger and larger as his voice swelled :

«You have an attractive wife. Aren't you afraid someone might seduce her ?»

He strolled to the window. The tree he had planted had grown. He could touch it. He stretched out his hand and picked one of its fruits and bit into it. It had a bitter taste, but he found the bitterness sweet. The bitterness lingered in his mouth.

«The damp has nearly ruined your studio,» Fatahiyya had said, her head resting on his chest.

He headed for the studio through a long narrow corridor.

He stood motionless in front of an unfinished portrait. Fatahiyya looked at him out of it. He turned away.

He remembered the night he started that painting. He hadn't meant to paint her ; hadn't even been looking at her. But she had sneaked into it through his brush. Why ? He wanted to tear it up, but his hands didn't move.

A pair of hands blindfolded him. His ears caught Fatahiyya's soft modulating tones.

«Guess who I am !»

He didn't feel annoyed. She kissed his hair. His eyes rested on her as she stood before him. She was wearning the same flimsy wrap she had worn that night, that far away night. How well he remembered it. Her eyes besieging him, snatches of tunes, the persistent sound of footfalls. They had swarmed over him, had sprawled themselves on the walls.

She had accused him of madness. He remembered exactly how he had flung away his palette and swept the canvas off the easel. He had felt her creeping on his chest, crawling and clinging while the walls were relentlessly pressing forward to shut him in. But which part of the room had Fatahiyya occupied that night ? She had stood exactly where she stood now, only she couldn't have been standing. He would have been able to see her if she had, and he hadn't. He had only heard her voice that night ; she had been just a voice.

«How could you leave at a moment like this ?» she had bawled. «This is the moment of decision ... You always leave at the wrong time !»

Yes, he remembered. His memory didn't let him down. He hadn't answered back, hadn't dared to look into her eyes. He had dreaded some mysterious power in her.

He had dashed down the stairs and she had rushed after him. And ... he had found them there, waiting for him. He had gone away with them. He laughed soundlessly, mirthlessly. Had he sensed they would be coming and had rushed out to meet them ?

He realized that Fatahiyya had put her arms around him. She shut out the painting from his view. He longed to tear her yellow flimsy wrap and with it the memory of the night he wanted so badly to obliterate.

He buried his head in her breasts.

«When did you leave bed ?» he asked.

She looked at him tenderly. He answered back with an expression of impotence.

«It's come back,» she said happily, «the moment of decision.»

She always devoured his initiative, his will ! His eyes retreated into the shadows of his lids. There was a long moment of silence, then Fatahiyya said, stressing every syllable :

«The moment ... the moment of decision. The years we've lost. They don't exist for us. They've robbed us of them. But if we go back to that night and start from there, we won't have lost them ; they won't have cheated us. We'll fool them. I have prepared everything.»

She walked around surveying her preparations, her thin wrap fluttering about her.

«Anything missing ?»

«When did you leave bed ?»

«I remember everything about that night down to the minutest detail,» she went on heedless of his question. «The canvas was there, the paints and palette where they are now. I stood right here and there was thunder in the air.»

«You weren't standing,» he wanted to interpose, but she went on :

«What else ? Yes, the music.» She switched on the music. «It's the same piece. You said, as you painted, that it rendered the terrible moment when the angel of light turned into the prince of darkness, rendred all its agony and sorrow. Agony over the opening of the floodgates of sin and vice, and sorrow over the loss of innocence. You said it with your face, with your paints. You were brave then Wafiq. I remember. The awful moment of decision ! when love perishes, and the green earth is flooded ; when the flower is crushed, and the breeze chokes, and mankind burn in hell ! And that painting ! That was the momen of decision ! ... the declaration of rebellion ... That is what you called it ... When Lucifer said No to his God, something in the very fabric of existence took courage and said no. At that moment you ran. The moment terrified you. Why did you run away Wafiq ? You were afraid to step into the glory of that awesome moment and shrank back. But you looked like a legendary figure. Your face was mythical. Today you won't run away. You will stand your ground. You must have learnt by now that one must never run away. You are here now. You won't run away another time.»

The music drowned him. He gasped for breath.

« Your face didn't know then the meaning of sadness,» she said.

«You left bed ...»

«Your face then didn't know the meaning of pain.»

«The bed,» he said as if stamping the floor with each syllable.

«It played an unearthly kind of music.»

He silenced the music impetuously.

«The music didn't stop that night,» she said.

«When I woke up in the morning ...» he stammered avoiding her eyes.

«Did you want me ?» She sounded surprised.

«I didn't find you in bed ... what I'm trying to say is ...»

«You wanted me in the morning ? It's so unlike you !»

As he spoke, he felt he was assuming the character of his old interrogator :

«You cried last night ?»

Her gaze strayed to the toy he had unconsciously stuffed into his pocket ; she acted as if the sight had distracted her from the question.

«You cried last night. Why ?» he repeated, stressing his words. He felt confident. Now she will confess. He experienced the same kind of confidence he used to read in the face of his interrogator.

«I am your woman,» she whispered coyly.

«She's dodging,» he thought. Why hadn't he been able to dodge his interrogator ?

«We are talking about your crying,» he urged, feeling that a confession was forthcoming. «You cried last night. Why ?»

«What else do you expect a woman to do when she suddenly finds her long-absent man in her arms ?»

He felt disarmed. But he mustn't give in.

«Would she weep so passionately ?»

«My man had been away, my bed cold, my nights endless.»

She breathed heavily, crept up to him, and clung to his body.

«My crying ? What do you know of my crying ?» she asked. «You should have seen how I cried in those long lonely night .»

He couldn't bear her breath any longer. He stopped breathing. A shiver ran through her. She voiced her son's name.

« Where is Samih ?» Wafiq took refuge in the question.

She trembled. Could somebody have told him about her mother ? But she hadn't left him for a moment since he came out.

«He'll stay with my mother for a few days,» she answered.

«Samih !»

«He distracts my attention from you.»

«But I want him here. I want Samih.»

«He is used to having me all to himself, and, ... you ...»

«My own son, Samih !»

«...........»

«My own flesh and blood !» he groaned as if he was being torn apart.

«But I told you last night.»

«I have spent years away from him. Isn't that enough ? !»

«I didn't mean ...»

«I have a right to hug my own child,» he wailed, the pain wringing his voice.

«But I thought ...»

«You thought worng.»

He hadn't found out about mother. She put all her gentleness into her voice as she said :

«Don't upset yourself. I'll go and fetch him straightway.»

His impotence overwhelmed him ; he fell down into a seat. She read something in his eyes.

«At once, I'll go at once,» she promised. She slipped off her wrap. «Do you miss him so much ?»

He was relieved. He rocked himself into his seat, then took out a cegarette and looked for a match. He didn't find one.

«Where are the matches ?» he asked without looking at her.

«I never dreamt it would make you so angry,» Fatahiyya said as she finished dressing. He pulled her to him, as if he was reluctant to let her go but said :

«How couldn't I be angry ?»

«You had every right to be, my love.»

She gave him a quick kiss. The cigarette fell from his hand. He stared at her portrait and felt a resurge of the same impluse to tear it up. He heard her retreating footsteps. His hand paused midway. The retreating sound died down.

He moved his foot and stamped out the cigarette with his toes. He wanted to look in the direction of the door, but, instead, turned his eyes to the wall. His fingers reached for the portrait, but hesitated. He walked to the window. He wanted to see her from the back ; but she had gone. He was surprised. How did she disappear so quickly ? Had it taken so long between the movement of his foot and the turning of his eyes to the wall ? Or had she taken the steps in one jump ? He breathed deeply at the window, then turned into the room. He avoided the portrait. He contemplated his fingers. He laughed. He rocked himself in his seat and felt comforted. He would go to sleep. He remembered that he woke up earlier than he used to before his arrest. He noticed an ant carrying a mite of food. He edged his foot slowly forward to squash it. He gazed at the walls of the studio. They were covered with his paintings. He felt a stranger, as if the paintings belonged to another man. He saw Fatahiyya looking at him out of all of them. He knew they were his. His eyes reverted to the ant, but he had lost her. He looked about for her anxiously and found her after some effort. His foot darted quickly and stepped on her violently. He had determined to kill her. He felt Fatahiyya standing over him. He jerked his head up. She wasn't there. She would always dodge him with her soft, clever equivocations. His eyes wandered over the room looking for her. He felt tired, as if he had suddenly aged. His eyes went back to the ant. She hadn't died.

The old jailer had warned : «If only you could protect your soul from ruin. They have brought you here to make you into a nest for the owls.» He remembered that he had seized him by the throat. He had choked him. It was the only dream he had ever had in his prison cell. They had stripped him of his dreams together with his clothes at the gates.

He shrugged his shoulders. They were deceived, he said to himself. «I had many dreams.» He despised himself for having tried to choke the good old man. But life in prison makes people behave despicably. He felt humiliated. He heard himself shout : «Why did you cry last night Fatahiyya ? Tell the truth.» He closed his eyes on her image in her thin yellow wrap, on an image of the beginning of the flood of sin and vice.. His seat rocked. The music which had quietly flowed around him exploded tumultuously. He welcomed the moment of annihilation. When something in the fabric of existence rebels, it utters the no of negation. It screams ... Can love perish ?

Fatahiyya no longer folded herself about him and enveloped him as she used to — the idea irked him and obsessed his mind. He stepped outside and tried to close the door softly behind him, but it slid from his hand and swung back giving forth a creaking noise. He stiffened. He expected the door to be pulled wide open and Fatahiyya to appear. He waited. He allowed sufficient time for her to cross the hall from the bedroom and reach the door. But she hadn't heard him.

He turned his back on the door of the flat and started climbing down the stairs. Having gone down two steps, the felt he wanted to sit down. He sat on the stairs. «This isn't Fatahiyya's body,» he said to himself. «Has she changed ?» His mind was blank. The tears had flowed from Fatahiyya's eyes into his own. Her voice drowned him : «My crying ? What do you know of my crying ? You should have seen how I cried in those long lonely nights ! ... My man away, my bed cold.»

The picture of her breasts swinging under her torn nightgown flashed across his mind. Had he ripped her nightgown last night ? He remembered that she had said : «I love this old nightgown. It always reminds me of my old knight».

He jumped to his feet. He was still the same old knight. He straightened himself. He saw a spider weaving his sticky threads round an insect. He stepped down the stairs confidently. Fatahiyya had asserted : «My love isn't a coward.» Her tone had carried the ring of confidence and it echoed in his soul. He glanced back at the door of the flat. He was sure Fatahiyya hadn't heard him go out and therefore could not be lurking behind the door. He remembered how in the old days, before he went to prison, she used to see him to the door every time he went out and stop him there to shower him with her endless chatter as if it was her last chance of talking to him. Had she given up this old habit of hers ?

He shook his head. Fatahiyya had definitely changed. He felt tired. He would go back to bed. He slipped his hand into his right-hand pocket to get the key. It wasn't there. He didn't look for it elsewhere. The urge to go back to bed fizzled out. He ascribed this to his not finding the key in his right-hand pocket. He didn't want to knock and have to wait. He didn't want to wake up Fatahiyya. She would ask him why he had gone out ? Why, since he had retired so late, had he got up so early ? Why he hadn't told her he was going out ? And where was he heading for at such an early hour ? ... He leant against the banister and closed his eyes wearily. He heard a door open. He shivered. The sound of the cell door. Impulsively he glanced back at his flat door. It was closed. He lifted his hand meaning to cup his left ear the better to listen. But half way it dropped back to his side. Had his wife woken up ? He realized that it had taken him a long time to cover the short distance from his flat to the door of the building. He was assailed by an indefinable feeling. It was daylight outside ; but the entrance hall was dark. What he felt wasn't fear. He had lost the taste of fear over there. inside the walls where time had died for him. Could he bring back to life something that had completely died ?

He was suddenly confronted by the features of the man with the shy voice who had faced him in that very spot five years ago. He consulted his watch. Only one minute had passed since he left the flat. He pouted. How he had lost his sense of time !

«Mr. Wafiq Kamel ?» the shy voice had asked.

« Yes.»

«You ... Mr. Kamel ? .. Be so kind as to accompany us.»

He remembered that he had liked the shy man and felt friendly towards him. He had walked beside him, chatted, and even given him a light.

If only he had pushed him away and run ! He could have easily disappeared into the narrow twisting alleys of El-Hussein district. He wouldn't have been able to catch up with him. He thought of Dawlat. Dawlat would have hidden him in the small garret where she

lived. But they had been many ; and he had been alone — a lonely figure carrying a tiny suitcase that contained nothing but a bathing suit. He had intended to go to the sea and sink the memory of his nights with Fatahiyya, to escape he flood. He remembered how surprised he had felt when he heard the shy man laugh. It had been a loud audacious laugh that made him wonder where it came from. He had found it difficult to believe that the timid man who had courteously offered to carry his bag for him could laugh so arrogantly.

He realized that it had grown light inside the entrance hall. He rubbed his eyes.

He tried to think why the man had laughed. He had opened the suitcase and burst out laughing. Because it had contained nothing but a bathing suit ? He couldn't be sure. His face which had at first struck him as impassive had eloquently spelt out his surprise.

« It seems you've been expecting us,» he had commented.

« And, therefore, brought along a swimming suit,» another had added gravely.

He tried to recall the face of the man who had said that, but only remembered that the man who had taken his bag from him had pushed him into a waiting car. He had resisted ; he had refused to sit where he had asked him.

Suddenly voices assaulted him on every side. He felt as if the walls of the old building had cracked, and from every crack a voice issued. He realized that the voices were welcoming him home. When he reached the door of the building and stood on the decaying step that led into the street, he knew that they had been waiting for him. For someone said :

«We knocked at your door, but no one answered.»

The voices became jumbled ; it seemed to him that they were taking the words out of each other's mouths :

«We were worried. Thought something might have happened. God forbid.»

He felt flustered. He hadn't expected to meet anyone. He grinned foolishly. He was hemmed in on every side by shrill voices and anxious faces. He longed to escape to Fatahiyya's warm bed.

«We only wanted to do what is proper, to welcome you home. You have been back for days and we haven't had the chance to congratulate you on your safe return. It isn't right. Wa are old neighbours.»

His grin widened vapidly. His hand came to the rescue ; it gesticulated nervously. He recognized some of the faces that surrounded him — people from the neighbourhood whom he occasionally met in the street. But many faces were unknown to him.

One voice rose above the others :

«Ral man are tested by hardships,» it cried complementingly.

He hung on the notes of this voice : it sounded familiar. He clung to it to climb out of his confusion. He studied closely the owner of the voice. He remembered him. It was Sayyidhum who used to wash and iron his clothes for him when he was an art student, and render him other special services. He had lost touch with him since he married Fatahiyya. His features were the same, those of an invincible man. The tone of his voice, however, had carried a hint of defeat. Wafiq felt a sudden surge of joy, as a stranger feels on suddenly coming upon a friend in a foreign land. He lunged towards him with eager affection. He wanted to talk to him, to flood him with his words. But his tongue felt heavy and cleaved to his mouth. The words stuck in his throat and wouldn't obey him.

«May Allah dishonour the bastards !» Sayyidhum bawled out.

The imprecation comforted Wafiq. It shored up his foundering spirits and stemmed his growing sense of helplessness. He waited for the crowd of well-wishers to disperse. He advanced a few steps, smiling around cordially. The tight circle loosened, but didn't break. He reached Sayyidhum and stood beside him. He wanted to be alone with him. In a moment they would go and leave him alone. He waited. A minute passed, then another. He nodded

waved, and smiled, and started thinking where he would go when they had gone, and whether he should go home.

But the density of the human circle which enclosed him had only thinned out to swell the circumference. He found himself being passed around and handed over from one well-wisher to another. The circle rolled along, carrying him forward, until it came to a halt at a busy crossing. He stood in a whirl of strangers. Passers-by were attracted by the sight of this sweat-drenched, tousled-haired Effendi (wearing a shirt and trousers) surrounded by a crowd of simple, uneducated townsfolk dressed in Galabiyyas. Some stopped to inquire, shook their head sympathetically and weny their way ; others, more curious, lingered and swelled the circle. Around them, the busy life of the street went on as usual. People were buying and selling and haggling at the vendor-carts which dotted the street, in complete indifference to the growing attraction.

The clientele of a near-by cafe found in the excitement of the crowd a welcome diversion from the monotony of the usual sights; it was a chance to dispel the boredom that builds up after long hours of tedious sitting. Some left their seats and joined the crowd; the majority, however, were content to watch from afar. They sat comfortably, smoking their hookahs, and sipping cups of steaming ginger, cinammon, and green tea. They laughed and joked loudly as they tried to guess at the reason behind the fast-swelling crowd that was rapidly expanding in their direction. Some conjectures were greeted with boisterous guffaws. One man swore that the crowd had gathered over nothing ; another contributed the witty rejoinder : «Like a holy shrine without a saint !» The remark caused an outburst of laughter. One man seized the chance to bet another a drink over the cause of the excitement. Some anxiously craned their necks and nearly stood in their seats to follow the crowd's progress. It was as if they expected something to go off any minute. Some shop-owners, fearing the consequences of such a big gathering, and dreading a riot, hastily lowered their shutters ; others stood in their doorways and watched.

Several stories and explanations flew around, each carrying a grain of truth buried in a mound of fabrication.

One man ventured :

«This Effendi has just come out of prison. But prison does not seem to have reformed him, for they have just caught him nicking some clothes off a washing line on the roof of No. 8.»

Another declared emphatically, buttressing his statement with an oath, that the surrounded man had been caught sleeping with his friend's wife. He pointed at a man standing on the door-step of a nearby house and announced that he was the wronged husband. He had been intent on murder, he added, but the crowd had persuaded him to take the matter to the police. A by-stander affirmed the truth of this story adding that the accused was a confirmed profligate. Many shady women had been seen coming in and out of his house, he said. He himself had reported these scandalous goings on to the superintendent of the police, he wound up self-righteously. Overhearing this, a man selling copies of the holy book cried out : «Have mercy on us God !» Not to be outdone by a rival in the holy trade, the woman selling rosaries joined in with : «Protect us from evil !»

An old bearded man, wearing shorts, and gesticulating hysterically, said explosively : «Crazy, crazy tomatoes !» (1) This brought forth a roar of laughter from some of the customers at the cafe. They nearly fell off their seats.

It seemed to wafiq that a great deal of what was happening around him had very little to do with him. He would curb his desire to get away and stand and watch the crowd for a while. He caught sight of a flame and knew that a street fire-eater was giving a performance. He wanted to watch, but it proved difficult. The way was blocked, and since he was short, his view was also blocked. He looked around him and realized that he was obstructed on every side by human bodies. It had never occurred to him before that cells could be made out of human flesh. He craned

(1) A familiar Street Vendors' Cry When they sell tomatoes. «Crazy» refers to the price of tomatoes which fluctuates sharply from season to season.

his neck in an effort to catch a glimpse of the dangerous feats of the fire-eater. But all he could see was windows, shop windows that carried the stamp of the old city, windows swarming with eager faces and pointing hands.

He tried to follow the direction of the pointing hands. He glimpsed a puff of smoke rising from the end of the fire-eater's rod. He couldn't be more than a few steps away from him, he thought. He pushed forward, slowly, laboriously. He felt someone grip his arm and looked back eagerly to find out who it was. A friend, may be ? But how difficult it was to find a friend in this sea of hostile belligerent faces !

He hazarded a tentative smile. No one smiled back. It dawned upon him then that the crowd were determined to keep him there. No one had said it explicitly ; but their gestures, and the expressions their faces wore clearly implied it. «A thief ! A thief !» a boy shouted. He thanked God he hadn't run when the cry startled him. If he had, they would have connected his running with the boy's shout, and would have pursued him, knocked him down and kicked him. They wouldn't have realized their mistake until it was too late.

Some people stepped on his feet; but he didn't budge. Someone pushed him ; but he was immovable, like a wall. His chest tightened. Something oppressed him. He wanted to scream in someone's face. Whose ? A woman screamed. He became alert. Was it Fatahiyya ? No, it wasn't her. «It's you Wafiq !» a woman ejaculated. «Good God ! I can't believe it !» He thought he recognized the voice. He tried to listen. But the voice disappeared like a whiff of smoke that suddenly blew away. He realized that something in the expression of his face encouraged some members of the crowd, particularly young boys, to poke him roughly. He set his mouth grimly. However, the hands became bolder. A boy tugged harshly at his clothes ; another sank his nails cruelly into his arm. He gave a muffled cry which occasioned some mirth. A hand slipped into his pocket. The air filled with the smell of roasting human flesh and incense. Impotence was written clearly in his eyes. An offensive voice jarred on his ears : «Good forgive him. Man is fallible.»

His eyes dimmed. He must call Sayyidhum. In the past, he had always found him whenever he needed him. His eyes searched for him beseechingly. But the indomitable man had melted in the turbulent human wave which had enveloped him. He noticed a policeman making his way towards him. Fear gripped him. He would be arrested for disturbing the peace and order of this busy commercial district. The crowd had obstructed the traffic which resulted in a long jam. Motorists tooted their horns and protested loudly. His fears ran riot. He had left prison only a few days ago, but they would drag him back there again.

His eyes clung desperately to the minaret of a nearby mosque. Surely Fatahiyya would come down now. She was a brave woman. She would come to his rescue at the right moment. She would cut her way through the crowd and save him. A strong hand stretched towards him. It must be her hand. He clung to it. It snatched him from the merciless waves. He blindly followed her, his eyes wide open. He was like a sleep-walker. A short while later he realized that it was Dawlat who was holding his hand.

Dawlat had arrived on the scene cursing the district and all its inhabitants for their lack of discrimination and their insolence to their superiours.

He realized that Sayyidhum had stood beside him all the time, and that it was his hand which had so roughly restrained him when he had wanted to move closer to te fire-eater.

Sayyidhum flared up at Dawlat's flagrant insults. The people had only meant to welcome their neighbour in their own special way, he protested ; it was the only thing they could do to repay his many kindnesses and favours. He had sent home for some Sherbet, he said. The boy was a bit late, but would soon come back, and the whole district would toast Wafiq's home-coming. It wouldn't be proper or courteous for Wafiq to withdraw before the ceremony, he insisted.

Dawlat spat contemptuously on the ground, shoved off an impudent urchin, and punched a man in the chest.

Wafiq drew his eyes away from the direction of Fatahiyya's window ; he mentally turned his back on his home. He looked at the people who had scattered like the beads of a broken rosary. He gulped. He glanced at the woman standing beside him once more to make sure that it was Dawlat. His eyes roamed over the crowd in search of the policeman he had earlier glimsed making his way towards him. He only heard the sudden pop of the old man's voice crying : «Crazy tomatoes !»

His breath enveloped Dawlat as they marched away from the protesting crowd side by side. Their shoulders touched, and his fingers enfolded hers. But they didn't look at each other. Dawlat was choking with emotion, and Wafiq was completely immersed in going over the incident.

Dawlat took hold of herself and spoke. «Welcome home,» she whispered. Her voice betrayed a feeling of helplessness.

Wafiq responded with an abashed smile : his shame at what had happened made his voice trip and stumble as he stammered :

«Dawlat !»

«Wafiq !»

«How are things with you ?»

«Fine. Everything is going to be fine now you are here.» Her voice trembled and she turned her face away ; but their shoulders drew closer.

«I suppose they meant well ; only their feelings are a bit primitive,» he murmured in a wounded voice.

«Primitive !» she exclimed in an enraged voice. «They are savages Wafiq !» she said, her bosom heaving.

It struck him that she caught at every chance to pronounce his name. He laughed.

«I suppose that is why I love them.»

«May thunder and lightening chase them wherever they go ! How could they do this to you, their benefactor ? ! It's scandalous !

By the Great Hussein, an unforgettable scandal !»

«They only meant to welcome me home.»

«And what a welcome ! I suppose it's your luck.»

It was only then that he saw her, really saw her. He used to know every detail of her figure. She had been his model and had often posed for him in the nude. It seemed to him that her body had taken advantage of his absence to mature. He stopped to verify his impression. He gazed at her flaming incandescent body. She realized that he had lagged behind and turned her head back as she said : «There are limits !»

He saw the colour or her eyes which had often puzzled him when he painted her. He was never certain what colour they were.

«Now I know the colour of your eyes,» he said excitedly.

Dawlat got his meaning and laughed, putting her hand to her mouth as if she was about to gather her laugh in her hand and throw it at him as she used to do in the old days.

«I have only my laugh,» she had often told him. How her laugh used to inspire him !

She swept her hand over her face. «You still remember ?» she asked. «Those were the days.»

«How is your father ?» He asked apprehensively.

«Dead,» she sighed. «Has been a long time.»

He was silent.

«He's better off where he is,» he said after a while, his eyes looking dazedly into the heart of nothingness. «Better than us, the living dead.»

She moved closer to him; she wanted to cling to him.

«You shouldn't say such things Wafiq. Poor man ! He died before his time.»

«God rest his soul,» he said soothingly. «He was a good man.»

She stopped at what seemed to be an extremely narrow opening between two houses and turned into it. He followed her. In a dark corner he could make out a stove, a tea-pot, and some glasses. It seemed that they belonged to her from the way she handled them. Surprise was written all over his face as he involuntarily pointed at the utensils with an inquiring gesture. She understood.

«It's better than begging,» she replied sorrowfully.

She tightened the knot of the kerchief that tied her hair and added :

«Those were black days. They had taken you away when he became sick. He died a few months after you went. He left me nothing, nothing but want and hunger, that is.»

He was deeply moved, and it showed on his face. He felt as if he had been responsible for her father's death. The feeling laced his tone as he asked : «what about his songs ?»

«He stopped singing,» she said with a sigh. «He said he wouldn't sing after you had gone. He smashed his fiddle and broke his heart. He died of sadness.»

Sorrow stiffened his features ; he shuffled his feet restlessly. He murmured as if to himself : «He loved me.»

She nudged him playfully as if to say «not as much as his daughter did.»

He laughed curtly.

She spread a shawl over an old wooden chair and invited him to sit. His fingers inadvertently touched her breasts. The blood rushed into her face. She became bolder and punched his shoulder coquettishly.

In an effort to disguise the tremor that ran through her body, she said :

«He never knew you made me sit naked in front of you.»

«But I never saw you.»

She started violently.

«But I did. I used to take my clothes off and sit in front of you for hours while you painted.»

«I saw you with my colours eyes,» he teased.

Her lips looked so red, as if they were bursting with blood. She tried to avoid meeting his eyes.

«Once you had made me very angry,» she reminisced. «When I got home I found that he had been asked to go and sing somewhere. He wanted me to go along with him as usual. He believed I brought him good luck. When I didn't answer he knew that I was angry with you and said: «don't get angry my daughter: Mr. Wafiq is an artist, and an artist is as temperamental as the sea. Wafiq is like the sea. Sometimes he lashes his waves not realizing that they could drown us. You must understand and forgive him.»

The wooden chair swayed and creaked under him. He looked at her head scarf as she bent to light the stove. It was the same red kerchief that the art critics had particularly admired when he put it in one of his paintings, the painting that set him on the road to fame.

Her back was turned to him as she prepared the tea. Her body was shaking with silent fury. She had sat before him nude and he had only looked at her as a painter, with his colours' eyes ! He never looked at her as a man. What more could she have done to make him see her ? She had taken off everything for his sake. Her father would have killed her had he known. One morning, as he dipped the bread into the dish of baked beans, his fingers had paused, and he had said :

«Be careful Dawlat. You are not a child anymore.» She had trembled as if he had caught her naked. But he had added reassuringly : «Don't feel embrassed ; I am your father.»

She nodded her head and turned to look at Wafiq. He was staring at the jumping, moaning lid of the kettle.

«He was blind, but he could see, God rest his soul,» she said. «I was looking at his face once and I suddenly felt that he was not

blind. I was sure of it. It made me jump. I nearly screamed. He patted my back and said : «You shouldn't be afraid of your own father.»

The kettle boiled oved putting out the stove. She stumbled about in her embrassement.

«And have you forgiven the sea ?» He asked, sipping a glass of the green tea he was fond of.

She suddenly saw, in her mind's eye, the woman he had introduced to her with the words «Fatahiyya, my wife.»

«No, I haven't.» Her voice quivered with pent up anger.

He burst out laughing. He laughed so heartily that the glass shook in his hand and his eyes filled with tears.

He suddenly stopped and his face went rigid. The tears stood in his eyes.

«If only you had seen me there ! There was no place to sleep. I slept on bodies and was covered with bodies. I slowly choked. Death was always within sight, but remained tantalizingly out of reach.»

Her face brightened as if she had suddenly understood something that had puzzled her. «That explains why I always had the strange feeling of being stifled !» She exclaimed.

There was a moment of deep silence. It was broken by the arrival of a customer. He asked for a glass of tea and curled up in a heap beside the wall. He started rolling a cigarette.

Wafiq remembered his brother Mitwalli.

«Have you seen Mitwalli ?» He asked softly.

«I caught a glimpse of him every now and then coming out of your house. I always ran after him and asked him to remember me to you. Did he do that ? How I missed you !»

«You saw Mitwalli coming out of my house ?»

«Yes, only a few days ago. When was it Dawlat ? When ? ... I think ...»

«Did he call on Fatahiyya ?»

«Yes, often. And everytime I asked to be remembered to you. You were away such a long time, and I did miss you.»

The customer with the ravaged face cried in a haggard voice :

«The tea, Dawlat !»

She remembered that he had just said : «Death was always within sight, but remained tantalizingly out of reach.» The words sank in. She slapped her chest and exclaimed aloud :

«Death ! God forbid. God forbid !»

It grew stuffy in the dark alley. Wafiq found difficulty breathing. The place was dark ; it was roofed in with dry palm leaves and rags. He would leave. When he went out in the morning he had had no idea where he was going. He had only tired of lying awake next of Fatahiyya and had crept out of bed. Fatahiyya had no idea where he was. The thought pleased him. He would leave now and take a walk. He would avoid passing by his house. She must be at the window now, looking out for him. Someone might have gone and told her of the crowed incident. She might inquire and find out that he had come here. She might even come. Would she be able to find her way to this place ? Dawlat looked at him and discerned that he was going to ask her about Fatahiyya.

«Don't. Don't ask,» she pleaded.

«Have I offended you ?» He asked twirling his fingers.

«Don't ask me anything.»

He saw that she was on the point of tears. He remembered that she had once burst into tears while posing for him. She had looked like a young girl who had suddenly encountered Spring on the road and had been startled by the first onset of love.

He stopped twiddling his fingers and watched her as she handed the customer a glass of inky tea.

«A blessed gift from God,» the man grunted in a throttled voice. «May it last.»

Wafiq drained his glass swallowing some of the leaves at the bottom.

«Are you a mind-reader like your father ?» He murmured. She sat down facing him.

«I bet you haven't had breakfast yet,» she said.

«I was a little peckish before I had the tea.»

«I too am hungry,» she said springing to her feet. «What would you say to a hot dish of beans with linseed oil ? I know it's your favourite. You must be dying for it.»

Not waiting for an answer, she ran out. She skipped across the cobbles of the narrow alley heedless of the curious glances, the meaningful winks, and the sly malicious comments that flew around her. They completely missed her.

«God rest his soul,» she said to herself as she ran. «He must have known that I posed naked for Wafiq. Why else did he warn me ?» She tingled with a vague thrill. She hugged the hot dish of beans and the warm loaves to her breasts. She hadn't forgotten to buy the chillies and the spring onions. She felt as light and heady as a bird. She found herself humming a sad air that her father used to sing whenever he felt in the mood to cry. Ske could always see his tears despite the dark glasses. If he were alive now he would have played his fiddle to welcome Wafiq and the whole district would have resounded with his joyful tunes. She reproached herself for humming a sad tune. A whiff of incense suddenly filled her nostrils and mingled with the smell of the beans. A voice cried : «Blessed be the prophet !» She was deeply moved. She reverently blessed the prophet and kissed the locket that contained a miniature of the holy Koran and hung round her neck. Her eyes raced her feet to where Wafiq sat on his wooden chair.

Her eyes dropped and lingered over the place where he had ripped her nightgown. Her heart overflowed with sorrow. Her fingers wandered aimlessly over her chest as if trying to catch the drops of suffering. The dog barked. Her eyes caressed Wafiq's place on the bed. It was empty. Her heart shook violently as she suddenly remembered : Her mother could go to prison. The night was over. She had meant to tell him in the night, to realieve herself of her solitar yburden. But the words had frozen in the icy darkness of the room. She hadn't the courage ot speak to him about it in the daytime ; the glint in his eyes frightened her. She stared at the shuttered window. She had heard the regular morning cry, «Blessed be the prophet», announce the coming of day. It must be well into the morning, she surmised ; for the cheerful cry came not at sunrise, but when the sun had moved well towards the centre of the sky. She clutched at the torn front of her nightgown. She could feel her sorrow seep through her fingers. She would have to wait for the night to tell him ...

The terror-stricken roads. Her sister Samia screaming. Her voice thundering : «My mother !» She had taken her younger sister in her arms.

She strained her ears to catch the cheerful morning cry once more, but heard only the heavy silence of the bed. She reached for the cover and pulled it over her feet, then over her head. She curled up under it as she had often done as a child. She saw her mother trying to throw herself out of the police van. She had screamed, she remembered, and her scream had seemed to give her mother unexpected strength. She had pushed aside the policeman who had blocked the van door. She had rushed at her mother to hug her. But the van had started moving away. Some people held her back. She had wanted to do something. What was it ? She couldn't remember.

She pushed away the cover as if it was the darkness underneath it that had dimmed her memory. She breathed deeply. She found her fingers still clutching at the tear in her dress.

Wafiq must have woken up early and gone to his studio. She relaxed. He had resumed his old routine. Her fingers loosened their grip but still rested on her chest. She smoothed her face and realized that she hadn't removed her make-up before going to bed the night before, as if she had feared he would perceive her pallor in the dark. She jumped out of bed and rushed eagerly to her mirror. She rubbed her face and removed the paints. She examined her clean face. It still looked young and fresh despite all that she had gone through. A merry voice under the window intoned : «What will be will be. Every man's fate is inscribed on his forehead. No man can escape his fate.»

She remembered that she had seen the owner of this merry voice once at the sacred shrine of El-Hussein. Wafiq had been away long and she had gone there to seek relief, hoping to wash away her sadness with her tears. The merry voice had murmured : «He who went will come back.» She had sought him in the same place the following morning. He had looked into her eyes piercingly and curtly said : «Men cry too.» He wouldn't say more. She wanted to run to Wafiq and ask him if he had cried when he was in prison. She laughed at herself and felt the blood rush into her cheeks. She examined herself in the mirror and felt grateful to the man with the merry voice. She would call to him from the window and throw him some money. He had done a great deal for her. His words had provided the only source of light in the impenetrable darkness that had then shrouded her life. She heard the dog scratching at the door. She let him in and hugged him gratefully. He had kept her company in her loneliness and protected her in Wafiq's absence. She pressed him tightly to her chest. He bore it uncomplaining. He knew it was the pressure of love.

«Don't be angry with Wafiq.»

He didn't wag his tail.

«You're angry with him, I know. But he didn't mean to offend you or hurt you feelings.» She patted him tenderly and her voice tinkled with feminine pride as she said : «He wanted his woman.» She pinched his neck and added playfully : You're jealous, you devil ! You terrified him. Imagine rushing at him like that ! No wonder he put on his clothes at once.»

She lowered her head and touched his face. «You don't want him to sleep with me, do you ?» She whispered.

Fatahiyya firmly believed in the transmigration of souls. She strangely believed that the soul of her first lover who had drowned in the Nile inhabited her dog Gasir. She kissed his muzzle and he happily wagged his tail.

«Come now. You will go to Wafiq and make it up.»

He seemed willing to do as she suggested.

«You know I couldn't do without you my love,» she added enticingly. She wiped her mouth as if to rub off the kiss of a man. Perhaps she should change her torn nightgown. She would wear the one Wafiq had bought her.

«Turn your face,» she ordered the dog.

He turned his head. She slipped on the new sky-blue gown and started applying kohl to her eyes. The face of the police-inspector stared at her out of the mirror.

«Your mother runs an illegal business. The evidence is conclusive,» he imperiously said.

She was crying soundlessly. The tears smudged the kohl ; it ran in dark streaks down her cheeks. The dog left his place by the wall and edged towards her. He rubbed himself against her as if he was trying to comfort her. She looked into his eyes and saw a tear drop. The dog was weeping too.

«My mother is a whore-monger, Gasir,» she whispered in anguish.

The door flew open and her mother burst into the room. Gasir barked and growled as the words shot out of her mouth with

a loud. bang. «Wafiq is back. I know. You didn't tell me. Why ? Is it right that I should hear about it from strangers ? How could you keep this from me ? Wafiq is my son. He is the only man I have left. Are you crying ? What is it ?»

Fatahiyya wanted never to stop crying. She wanted to rush into her mother's arms and go on weeping. Her mother alone could comfort her. She would understand and pity her tears. But the tears dried up in her eyes. Her mother pulled her towards her by the hand.

«Why are you crying ? What happened ?»

«Nothing,» Fatahiyya stammared dejectedly.

The mother shook a deeply-lined fist at the dog.

«You should never cry now that Wafiq is back. Dry your eyes. This is a time to rejoice. Where is Wafiq ? I am dying to see him.» She turned to the mirror and surveyed her perfect make-up. «Did you want to keep it a secret from me ? Nothing remains a secret for long these days.»

Fatahiyya wondered whether Wafiq had already found out her mother's secret. She looked at her mother's body. The sight oppressed her.

Her mother watched her tenderly. «You look tired,» she said gently.

«On the contrary. I look unusually fresh this morning.» Her voice carried a note of defiant hostility.

The mother turned her face to the mirror and said, as she applied more kohl to her eyes : «You can say what you like. But this isn't my daughter's usual face.»

There was a moment's silence. It was broken by the mother. Her voice had remained femininely attractive despite her years. «Has Wafiq upset you ?»

Fatahiyya shrugged her shoulders. «And why should he upset me ?» she retorted.

The mother gave a short brazen laugh. Fatahiyya's face contracted.

«Where is Wafiq now ?» the mother asked imperiously.

«In the studio,» the daughter answered submissively.

«Couldn't wait to catch his breath, could he ?»

Fatahiyya couldn't find anything to say. She was annoyed as her mother made her way to the door. She shouldn't have told her where Wafiq was. She noticed her mother's flimsy dress. Blood boiled in her veins.

«How could you come here dressed like that ?» She exploded. «This is an old-fashioned district. How many times have I told you !»

Her mother turned and smiled at her.

«Haven't we had enough scandals ?» Fatahiyya had wanted to add, but the words stuck in her mouth.

«When they told me this morning that Wafiq was out, I couldn't believe my ears. I couldn't wait to change. I came as I was. I couldn't help it. He is the husband of my nearest and dearest.»

Despite the glib words, Fatahiyya saw in her mother's eyes the look of a broken woman. The dog stood in her mother's way as she advanred to the studio. She kicked him. He retreated momentarily.

«Get that beast out of my way. He gives me the creeps,» she cried.

Fatahiyya did not respond at once. The dog sprang at the old woman. She screamed in terror.

«Get him away from me ! He has the eyes of the devil ! The glint in them ! God protect us ! He is the devil !»

Fatahiyya dragged the dog away and held him tenderly.

«It beats me how you can stand that monster,» her mother exclaimed.

They didn't find Wafiq in the studio. Fatahiyya heaved a sigh of relief. The woman said involuntarily : «So Wafiq is out of prison.»

Fatahiyya's face brightened, as if she had suddenly realized that her husband was out of prison.

«He wasn't in bed when I woke up,» she said. «I thought he had gone to the studio to finish my portrait.»

«He went out without letting you know ? !»

«Must have missed going out and watching life in the early morning.»

Hesitantly, like someone stealthly feeling his way in the dark, the woman asked : «Why was he arrested ?»

«I don't know.»

«Don't play the fool with me,» the expression on the mother's face said. Aloud she exclaimed : «Of course you know.»

Fatahiyya shrugged her shoulders : «How could I know when he himself hasn't a clue ?»

«People don't get arrested unless ...»

«Wafiq is innocent,» Fatahiyya interrupted vehemently.

Like your mother, the woman retorted inwardly. «If he were innocent, why did he stay in prison for years ?» she asked accusingly.

Fatahiyya frowned. «Wafiq is innocent,» she sternly repeated.

Her mother realized that she had only succeeded in making her angry. She retreated. «Thank God for his safety,» she said.

«Wafiq is a good man. Unlike some.»

The words pierced the mother's heart like bullets. Her voice stuck in her throat. She was inwardly bleeding. She felt dizzy and leant against the wall for support. Her hand accidentally knocked against a painting.

Fatahiyya realized that the shot had gone home. She was silent. After a while the mother broke the silence.

«I am going,» she said.

«Dont'.»

«He shouldn't see me dressed like this.» It was an excuse, that could work, she thought. She took Fatahiyya's hands in hers tenderly to say goodbye.

«Wait and have breakfast with me,» Fatahiyya persuaded, «I haven't had in yet.»

«I have no appetite these days.»

«You need rest.»

«I shall go to the sanatorium.»

Fatahiyya shuddered. «No, don't !»

«My lawyer advised it.»

«But I need you.»

«You only need Wafiq,» she said. Then suddenly, as if overcome by sadness, she added dolefully : «I have nothing left to give. Does he know ?» she asked hoarsely.

«Not yet.»

«Don't tell him.»

«He has to know.»

«I'll tell him myself.»

«No, leave this to me.»

Wafiq walked into the room unexpectedly. The blood drained from Fatahiyya's face. She tried to smile to disguise her pallor. The mother took hold of herself. She remembered how she had had to control herself when she was taken before the police-inspector for questioning. Wafiq switched on the light. He found himself face to face with Nahid, but his face remained expressionless as if she had been one of the portraits on the wall. He was strangely silent. Fatahiyya was agitated and apprehensive. Nahid threw herself at him and hugged him with genuine yearning.

I only heard this morning,» she exclaimed breathessly. «I came at once. I didn't even wait to change. I couldn't. Your wife is a selfish woman. She didn't want to share her joy with anyone, not even her mother. But I don't blame her. In her place, I would do ...» Her voice trailed off into silence.

Wafiq swallowed. Fatahiyya switched off the light, then switched it on back again. The old woman's voice quivered with emotion.

«You must have had difficult time ...» she said.

Fatahiyya averted her face.

The voice of sergeant Omar resounded in Wafiq's ears : «If treason is proved, you will pay for it with your neck.» He wished he had paid with his neck and ended it all !

Nahid patted his back and said emotionally : «Yes, a difficult time. Every moment seems to last a whole weary life time, like a heavy weight on the chest that doesn't crush ... only stops one breathing.»

Wafiq's fingers itched to feel his neck.

«Those moments !» She went on, her voice choking with tears, «How well I know them !»

Wafiq didn't hear her last words. He was thinking of Sergeant Omar. He had promised to pay him a visit and had taken his address. He hasn't called yet. Why ? He had told him that he always went to the shrine of El-Hussein whenever his sins and cares weighed him down. There he laid his load at the saint's feet. It occurred to Wafiq that he too should visit the holy shrine. But the idea left him unenthusiastic.

«Wafiq is tired,» Fatahiyya wailed like a mourner at a wake.

This checked Nahid's emotional flow ; she controlled herself and assumed a sober tone. «Welcome home once more Wafiq,» she said, avoiding his eyes. «God be praised for bringing you home safely.»

Wafiq felt as if his head had left its place on his shoulders.

«He didn't get any sleep last night,» Fatahiyya pleaded.

«You do look as if you haven't slept at all my darling,» Nahid said with feeling.

Fatahiyya panted. She examined an unfinished painting. At one moment she thought her mother was going to speak again. She didn't want her to tell him about her arrest. Her eyes darted to her mother's lips. They were tightly pressed. She thought that the best way to ensure her mother's silence was for her to chatter without pause. The words tumbeld fast from her mouth :

«Where have you been Wafiq ? I didn't find you when I woke up. Where did you go ? I haven't had breakfast yet. Mother hasn't either. We were waiting for you. Let's all have breakfast together Life feels so wonderful in the early morning. They deprived you ...» She swallowed the rest of her words.

Her mother took up her sentence, as if she had been waiting for this pause. «They deprived you of your sleep, the damned devils,» she said.

«I don't want to sleep,» Wafiq said tentatively, as if he was trying to prove to himself that his head was still on his shoulders.

Nahid silently studied wafiq's face. She realized that the years in prison had eaten away into his soul and somewhat dimmed the old sparkle in his eyes. She sensed that he hated her now more that ever before. She gave him a penetrating look. She wanted to verify her impression, but his face was inscrutable.

Fatahiyya broke the silence : «Where were you ?» She asked. She hadn't expected a reply and was surprised when he said :

«I looked up Dawlat.»

Her voice glowed with happiness. «She is such a nice girl. She always asked about you. Whenever I met her she begged to be remembered to you. She even wanted to visit you there. She begged me to take her along. She became so persistent I began to avoid her. It was very strange the way she went on about you. Her chatter stirred up all my sorrows. Every time your brother called, she tagged along. She wouldn't stop ...» Fatahiyya suddenly realiz-ed how silly her chatter must sound and ceased.

Wafiq winced. He tried to shun her eyes. His gaze lighted upon Nahid's thickly dyed hair, and travelled down to her heavily shadowed eyes and her deeply blood-coloured lips. He noted her flimsy dress. His eyes wandered aimlessly among the paintings which littered the room. He breathed with difficulty.

Fatahiyya saw a chance to drag her mother away. «You want to work, Wafiq, don't you ?» She pulled her mother by the hand repeating, «Wafiq wants to work.»

Her mother resisted. She didn't wish to leave. She wanted to be with Wafiq. He was the only one who could understand, who had gone through her experience. He knew what it felt like to be dragged by a stranger's hand, to be shoved into a dark hole and left alone there, to hear the iron doors clang shut, to scream and get no response, to scream and scream until you became hoarse and exhausted, and then crumble beside the wall. But he had turned his back on her and walked to the window. She yielded to her daughter's hand. At the door she heard him calling. Her hopes revived ; she flushed ; he was calling her ; he had realized that he needed her as much as she needed him. She turned, but Fatahiyya's hand restrained her. The mother strained her ears and listened.

«Fatahiyya ! Fatahiyya !» He called in a sharp peremptory tone.

Fatahiyya quickly pushed her out into the corridor and shut the door behind her as if she was afraid that she would follow her back in as she ran to him.

Nahid waited in the dark corridor. She lit a match, took out a cigarette and lighted it. It tasted bitter. The walls of the narrow corridor reminded her of the cell where she had stayed a few days. She felt suffocated. She dragged at her cigarette nervously. The walls crept closer towards her. They would soon crush her chest. She needed air. There was never enough fresh air in these old rambling houses. She had often tried to persuade them to take another flat. She longed for air. She dropped her cigarette on the stone floor and stepped on it. She realized she was marring the cleanliness of her daughter's home. She bent down and picked up the stub.

She walked to a window which overlooked the street, opened it, and threw it out. She saw some boys pushing her car. They could damage it. She had just bought it, put all her savings into it — the toil of years. She walked to the door and managed to open it with some difficulty. She went down the stairs. When she finally reached the entrance of the ancient tenement-house she took a deep breath. The boys scattered when they saw her coming. She glanced casually at her clothes and noticed that her underwear showed through her transparent dress. She felt embarrassed and took refuge in the car.

As she closed the door, she noticed a few people staring at her angrily. She started the car quickly and drove at a speed uncommon in that narrow crowded street. Some children cheered ; a boy who had hung to the bumper fell off as the car jerked forward ; an earthenware pot dropped from the window of an opposite building and smashed on the road. She laughed with every fibre of her body at this furious demonstration of moral indignation. She laughed until the tears covered her cheeks.

He chewed the tobacco smoke of his hookah. He chewed at his lips as he sat on his wooden chair at the road-side cafe. He felt the chair with the fingertips of his right hand. He wanted to identify the chair on which he used to sit before they took him away. He had often sat there and surrendered himself to the night as he watched the busy scene. His fingers seemed to recognize the chair. He laughed. He discovered that he had smoked all the tobacco in the hookah. He should call the cafe-owner and ask for a fresh supply. He didn't feel like it.

He saw the cafe-owner approaching. Their eyes met. Wafiq considered leaving. Unwillingly he clapped his hands to call for service. A young waiter appeared. He had wanted the owner to come to him in person. Perhaps he would explain his strange unfriendly attitude to his old customer. The waiter who attended him was a mere boy. He didn't recognize him. The waiter busied himself with the hookah and was replacing the burnt out coals with fresh ones. He handled the still glowing embers with his bare fingers.

«Watch out ! The fire !» Wafiq cried.

«Fire never burns me,» the waiter replied, laughing stupidly

Wafiq looked at his eyes. He didn't wear the look of childish innocence.

«My fingers drink up the fire,» the waiter continued. «You must have heard of the Hazanbalah family, the fire-eaters. I am the youngest. You must be a stranger here. We came from the city of Tanta the year before last at the holy Hussein's birthday and have been living here since. He live in a tenement-house in the alley next door.»

Wafiq nodded. He drew at his hookah. The young waiter had only spoilt it.

«This isn't really my trade,» the boy said apologetically. «I am a fire-eater. But I quarrelled with my elder brother. He insulted me in public. My father, God rest his soul, would never have done it. He loved me. But my brother ... He is jealous because I get more applause from the public than he does . The people love my performances. The fire loves me ; it never hurts me.»

Dawlat's voice echoed in his ears. He stretched his neck and looked for her around the square. She wasn,t there. His gaze was lost in the vast square rapidly paling in the gathering twilight. He felt like an orphan The boy was still chattering. Fire never burns the true believer. The ring of his voice reminded him of Dawlat's. «I wouldn't put up with insults. I'd much rather starve,» the boy exclaimed. Wafiq's cheeks burned as he remembered the heavy hand of the jailer coming down on his face.

The boy's chatter oppressed him. «Go,» he commanded. «Go and change the coal and mend the hookah you've spoilt.»

He hadn't seen his mother since he came out. His mother had aged and become feeble, he thought, trying to justify to himself his neglect : he couldn't bear to see her helpless. Her voice echoed in his ears ... «You became a father after you went to prison.» Her few words the one time she had visited him in prison. He brought his fist down on the brass table. The boy came back carrying a few lighted coals. His face wore a vapid smile. He made a few acrobatic movements with the coals which made Wafiq laugh.

«I used to clown a bit after the fire-eating act,» the boy said. «It made the people laugh and shower me with coins.»

Wafiq drew deeply and richly at his replenished hookah. He was wafted into the past ; its ghosts hovered round him. He remembered the man who had embraced him. An outlaw. He rarely embraced anybody. But he had embraced him. He longed to see him again. He had dodged the interrogator. At one time he had thought that the man must be a figment of his imagination. «His time hasn't come yet.» Omar the jailer, had told him. «He is useful as a trap for outlaws. They will bring him in when he has served his purpose. One day, you will see him in the opposite cell.» He tried to remember the man's face. His memory failed him. He

had first met him at one of his own exhibitions. He had admired Wafiq's paintings hugely, had bought five paintings and paid handsomely for them. He realized that the boy-waiter was still hovering around him. The boy asked him politely if he needed anything else. Wafiq shook his head impatiently. He wondered if that mysterious man had meant to recruit him for some special purpose. What could he have seen in his face to convince him that he was a possihle rebel ? An outlaw ?

He tried to remember everything the man had said when he was buying the paintings. There hadn't been anything of particular significance. He had made several disconnected remarks mainly about his admiration for Wafiq's art. He had completely forgotten the conversation until he had had to remember it at the insistence of the interrogator, or, rather, invent it. He had made up a plausible dialogue between an artist and an admirer for the benefit of the interrogator, and forgot it as soon as the interrogation was over. But the following morning the interrogator had questioned him over his story. He had stammered. The details had seeped through the holes in his frayed memory. He had made up another dialogue. The interrogator had reminded him of his former story. He had spent the whole of that night memorising and rehearsing the imaginary conversation to guard against any inconsistencies in case he was called up and questioned about it again the following morning.

The boy came back carrying a flame. It was obvious that he wanted to chat. Wafiq waved him away with his hand. The boy misinterpreted the sign ; he thought Wafiq was inviting him to speak.

«My brother sent someone to make the peace between us,» hs said. «Do you think I ought to go back and join him ?»

Wafiq was seized by a violent fit of coughing. It rocked his body and brought the tears into his eyes. He had met the mysterious man a second time also by chance. He had been going to a concert and had glimpsed him some distance away. He had run after him and embraced him then looked into his face to verify that it was him and not someone else he had mistaken for him. He hadn't known his name then. The interrogator had supplied him with it.

He could still remember his features quite clearly. His face had struck him as clear and open with no hint of deceit. His eyes had dimly shone with a dormant glow. He would go and see him. In prison he had made up his mind to seek him. Once he had contemplated running away and finding him. He was the only man who could acquit him and he had determined to obtain his acquittal even if he had to wrench it from him. He knew where he lived ; sergeant Omar had found out for him. He had memorised the address.

He would leave the cafe now and go to this address. He was assailed by dark misgivings. He clung to his chair and clasped his hookah close. It was one of the few things that still gave him comfort and pleasure. He puffed at it, swallowing the smoke. A sense of well-being pervaded him. He saw the boy-waiter slink away from the cafe and disappear into a nearby alley.

Once he had asked sergeant Omar when they would release him. «When they remember you,» he had replied. «They have forgotten all about you. They suffer from chronic amnesia. It's a blessing somtimes,» he had added.

He closed his eyes. He wanted to forget. He joined his hands on his stomach. He heard his mother say : «You became a father after you went to prison.» He wanted to stop his ears. Samih's face floated before his eyes. He heard him call «sweets Wafiq !» Dawlat had said : «Samih doesn't look a bit like you !» Why hadn't he died in there ? If only he could stop his heart beating ! Put an end to his life ! «We are fated to live and suffer,» sergeant Omar had whispered in the morning line-up.

He looked in the direction of the cafe-owner. The man turned his face away. In the old days, Shalabi, the cafe-owner, would personally bring him his hookah. Should he remonstrate with him ? Would he explain ? Perhaps he would then know ! What does Wafiq know ? But he knows. «You have a lovely wife,» the interrogator's voice intruded. «Aren't you afraid someone might seduce her ?»

He smoked greedily his fifth hookah. Fatahiyya had been unfaithful. He remembered how she had cried in his arms. He heard the cry of the man with the merry voice, «Blessed be the prophet !» His fingers stretched to the live coals on the hookah tray and stirred them. «Fayahiyya has deceived me,» he said to himself in a dazed voice. He would go to her now and settle the account. He saw the eyes of the interrogator looking him over mockigly and summing him up as a fool. He heard the iron door of the cell clang shut. «The cold nights have eaten into my bones,» Fatahiyya' voice whispered in his ears. The lighted coal scortched his fingers. He withdrew his hand and waved it in the air to cool it. «Damn those nights, Wafiq.» Those nights ! He remembered the many sleepless nights he spent staring at the black sky through the bars. «My mother taught me,» Fatahiyya's voice whispered. Damn her mother, the woman who ... He remembered how she had hugged him ; she had felt like a corpse ; had suffocated him. He had wanted to strangle her. Why hadn't he ? His fingers clutched at something. His eyes wandered. He was besieged by innumerable eyes. Shalabi's eyes were vaguely accusing. His ears caught Dawlat's voice. He got up and ran until he found her standing by her wall selling glasses of black tea. She hugged him with her eyes then closed them, as if to disguise what she had done. She handed him a glass with a trembling hand. He sighed. Silence held them for a moment. Wafiq didn't sip his tea. Dawlat stopped breathing as he held her face in his fingers and lifted it up to him. She was on the point of tears.

«They told me you were at the cafe ... The people ...» She stammered. Their eyes meet.

«The people ... ?» Wafiq urged in a tearful voice.

«They are angry,» She burst out. «The woman who called on you yesterday ...» She slipped her hand into her bosom and brought out a scrap of newspapers. He saw the photograph of a woman. His eyes swam. It was an old picture of his mother-in-law as a younger woman. For a moment he mistook it for his wife's.

«My wife ?» He asked in a crushed voice.

«Her mother. What happened to your eyes ?»

«My wife ?»

«Her mother, the respectable lady Nahid — in her youth as the paper says,» she sneered.

«Her mother ?»

«She's a bad influence. The people of the neighbourhood are worried about their daughters.»

«Fatahiyya !» Wafiq said voicelessly.

«A sinful woman. Trades in vice. God protect us. The peoptle saw her coming out of your house yesterday.»

He got up. walked ahout agitatedly, then came back and sat down He stared at the lit stove and gulped.

«If it hadn't been for you, you the best of men, they would have stoned her. They say she came to your house in a flimsy nightdress. God protect us from the evil !»

«And Samih ?»

«There has been a lot of gossip. They say the vice-squad are after her, and the police. The mother of your respectable wife has run away from prison. Have mercy on us God !»

«And Samih ?»

«The people are afraid she would move in with you, God forbid. She stayed at your place for quite a while when you were away.»

His grip tightened on the glass he was holding until it shattered. Blood spouted from his hand. Dawlat screamed and tore off part of her dress to bind it. But Wafiq rushed away. She tried to stop him, to stop the bleeding, but failed. He ran away, blood streaming from his fingers. Tears ran down Dawlat's cheeks. Wafiq felt the curious looks of the bystanders tear him apart. The man with the merry voice blocked his way.

«Don't get worked up,» he said. «Relax. Your wife is a chaste woman.»

Dawlat screamed at him. Wafiq couldn't take in anything of what was going on around him. The walls were closing in on him and the ground refused to open up and swallow him. Dawlat watched helpessly, drinking in her tears.

3.00 a.m.

Wafiq coughed and tossed in his bed. The night was long. He hadn't slept a wink. At first only his hand had hurt. Now the pain had spread to his head. He felt he wanted to scream and go on screaming. In prison he had learnt to suffer silently. He wanted to look beside him, but his eyes wouldn't obey. He felt his chest. The sadness lay deep into his chest.

Fatahiyya turned in bed. He expected her to wake up. He shut his lids tight. He didn't want to speak to her. She had screamed when she saw the blood streaming from his hand, had bombarded him with questions. He had taken refuge in silence. He had left her his hand to tend and avoided her eyes. He had known that if their eyes met he would explode. The prospect had frightened him.

He felt her fingers on his lids, trying to prise them open. He buried his face into the bedclothes. He wanted desperately to cry. But he couldn't shed a single tear. The darkness was deep, his sadness fathomless. His ears filled with the noises of the cell. He felt utterly helpless. His hands ran over the bed and his fingers accidentally touched Fatahiyya. He wanted suddenly to take her into his arms, to bury his impotence deep into her breasts. Bitterness filled his mouth. He heard the man with the merry voice cry : «Blessed be the Prophet !» It aroused him. The man had told him last night : «your wife is chaste.» The pain in his head suddenly vanished. He sprang out of bed and stood beside it watching her. He could see her clearly in the dark. She lay in the moonlight, her eyes closed. He would run to the man with the merry voice and question him. He heard Samih murmur in his sleep. He pricked his ears. He heard him once more. He wanted to look at his son. He watched him as he lay in his mother's arms. He bent down to kiss him, but realized that he had kissed the mother instead. A tear escap-

ed from his eye. Samih's mother is chaste. He was happy that he could cry. But it had been an illusion : his face was perfectly dry.

At the door he felt that he was finally at peace with himself He breathed in the darkness. The streets looked unusually dark. People moved through the shadows like ghosts. He glimpsed a soldier leaning a gainst a wall ; heard a child crying. No, it wasn't Samih. Samih was safe in his mother's arms. He tripped over a sleeping body, an old man hugging a cat, a man who earned his living removing people's left-overs. There were lights in Shalabi's cafe. He strained his eyes looking for him. He found him sitting in his usual place. He wanted to talk to him. He went into the cafe. A man started and curled up in his chair. Wafiq smiled at him reassuringly. He sat next to him. The man resumed his noisy sleep. He remebered the boy waiter and his acrobatics. His eyes travelled round the cafe searching for him, but he remembered that he had seen him leave. He needed to talk to someone. He called on the sleeping man ; he didn't hear him. He placed his hands on him and started shaking him. He heard the cry of the man with the merry voice in the distance. He jumped to his feet and ran in the direction whence came the voice. At the end of the sound trail, he found a man. He gripped him by the arms and asked frantically :

«What do you konw about my wife ? Last night you said that my wife was chaste.»

«Prayer is better than sleep,» was all the man's reply.

«But I didn't sleep last night,» Wafiq retorted.

Taking him for a madman, the man said soothingly : «Take it easy my son. Bless the prophet.» He slipped out of Wafiq's grip and hastened away intoning his usual cries.

Wafiq listened carefully to the tone of his voice ; it was unmistakably that of the man with the merry voice. He ran after him. The man was frightened and quickened his step. Wafiq stopped suddenly. He tried to remember the face of the man who had spoken to him outside Dawlat's tea-stall the night before. His memory only recalled the face of the interrogator. He breathed hard, and

Fatahiyya's words floated out on his breath. «You want to carry me and fly away as if someone were chasing you and trying to snatch me away. ... I woudn't let you be knocked down. My eyes embraced you and held you up.» He leaned against a wall for support. A light came into a nearby window. A voice said : «Light the stove and warm up some water. It's near pra yer time.» It struck him as very similar to the merry voice of the man he was seeking. When the voice stopped he felt certain it was the same man. He wanted to go into the building and find him, but he only sat on the door-step and waited for him. He would soon come out on his way to the mosque. He wouldn't let him slip out of his hands this time.

6.00 a.m.

Fatahiyya's mother opened her eyes wide with a start. She slapped her chest in surprise and exclaimed : «Have they taken him away again ? !» She droned on in a sleepy voice : «They never stop do they ? Curse them ! What more do they want ? Haven't they done enough ?»

Fatahiyya frowned. Her mother's words sounded vaguely ominous. She reminded herself that Wafiq was now free. «God forbid ! Don't ever say that again !» she shouted at her mother.

They were silent. A cloud crossed the mother's face ; her lids drooped. She closed her eyes and yawned.

Fatahiyya realized that she had made a mistake calling on her mother so early in the morning. Only once before had she done that. After Wafiq's arrest, some men had come and ransacked the flat. They had carried away some of Wafiq's things. She had considered it then sheer plundering and had run to her mother to tell her about it.

She looked at her mother's mouth as she lay still on her bed. Her lips voicelessly said : «Thank God for that.» The mother drew the covers over her nearly naked body. Fatahiyya considered leaving and going home. Soon her mother would become fully awake and insist on knowing what had brought her so early. What could

she tell her ? She remembered Wafiq's face as he walked in last night, blood squirting from his hand and drenching his clothes. She had looked into his eyes and felt as if something inside him had been torn to shreds. She knew that whatever it was, it related to her. She had ached to inquire what it was they had mutilated out there in the streets, but had been unable to speak. She had spent the whole night in tears. She had seen him get up in the dark and kiss Samih. Her heart had quivered. She remembered the night he left, carrying his suitcase. He had stayed away for years.

«God forbid,» she whispered to hearself.

Turning her back on her, the mother sleepily asked : «Why the tears ?»

It was as if her mother had sudenly given her an excuse to give vent to her tears. She flung herself at her mother's back. The woman sat up and happily folded her in her arms. Her daughter hadn't cried in her arms for a long time. She was glad to discover that she was still her only source of comfort.

«Has he found out ?» she asked when the storm of tears abated.

«I can't stand it any longer,» Fatahiyya cried. «The suspense. The silent waiting. You told me to wait until you were acquitted of the charge. But I can't bear it. There is something in his eyes, something I can't understand. I can see it, but I can't read it. I know you are innocent. But there are people, bastards, who won't believe it and won't leave us alone. What had Wafiq done to deserve being dragged to prison ? He was only going to Alexandria to drown his troubles in the sea. I sit and wait for him, and every time he walks in I expect him to throw the paper in my face and shout «your mother !». Why haven't I told him ? Why do we hurt each other without meaning to ? What have we done to suffer so much ? What did the lawyer say ? Ah, I remember. He assured you that they would bring in a verdict of not guilty. I know you are not guilty, but would Wafiq believe me ? I have tried so many times to tell him ; but every time a certain glint in his eyes makes me shy away. I told myself I would speak to him at night, in the dark. But in the dark I could still

see his eyes gleaming. Last night his eyes looked dead, as if the light had gone out of them completely. No, it wasn't that ; there was a strange light in them, not the familiar sparkle, I know Wafiq. No. I don't think so, not anymore. He wouldn't keep anything from me ! He loves me ! It is as if he has been snuffed out. But my flame will keep on burning. He came to me, blood streaming from his fingers, and bits of glass sticking to his palm. He gave me his hand to tend. He didn't show any signs of pain. Wanted to spare my feelings. Wafiq is my whole life ! But he didn't say a word. Perhaps he has found out. Perhaps someone was rude and insulted him and he had to put him in his place. And his fingers ... I don't know. He didn't sleep, got up before dawn and went out, to the mosque to pray, I thought, to wash off the troubled thoughts of the sleepless night. I let him go. But he didn't come back. Why didn't I stop him. I know I should have. It was a mistake. My mind tells me that he won't come back. Why is justice always late, too late ? His eyes don't shine in the dark as they used to. I looked at him as he bent down to kiss Samih, and his eyes were dim. The old light has died. Can love die mother ? Tell me ; you are a woman of experience. Can love die ?»

7.00 a.m.

He failed to find Dawlat's place. He had tried many buildings and knocked at many doors. Her phrase, «sinful woman» hounded him. He had thought for a moment that Dawlat was referring to Fatahiyya. He pounded with his fists on the wooden door of yet another house. He heard someone talking inside. It was Dawlat's voice.

«Come down Dawlat. I must see you,» he shouted urgently.

«There is no one here by this name,» a woman's voice answered from behind the door.

«But I heard her voice,» Wafiq called back. He discerned a woman's face in the dark well behind the door.

«You have been standing by the door for a long time, my son,» she said cordially. «There is no one called Dawlat in this whole alley. Try the alleys nearby.»

He thrust his neck forward trying to catch the notes of the voice once more. But the voice had dissolved into the darkness. Wafiq shuffled away across the alley. The sweat made his trousers stick to his legs. His eyes wandered over the houses. His memory retained a picture of her house. But now all the houses seemed to him alike.

He leaned against the wall of the opposite house. He expected Dawlat to look out. He lifted his head and gazed up at a gap-in window. But it stood empty. Dawlat did not appear. He saw her in his mind's eye. He remembered how she had looked at him the first time he saw her after his release. There had been tears in her eyes. She knew something, something that she wanted to keep a secret from him. «Don't !» she had exclaimed when he had tried to question her about Fatahiyya. She must know the truth. He clasped his hands behind his back and strolled away. He tried to fix and clarify his thoughts, but he was no longer capable of lucid thinking. He halted suddenly before a door ,and his feet carried him unthinkingly inside. His steps hastened up the stairs to the roof of the house. He reached a garret at the top. The door was ajar. He pushed it open and found Dawlat lying there on a bed half-naked. Dawlat screamed : «Wafiq !» The sweat covered his face He faced the other way. She didn't cover herself at once. She didn't see the point of it — after all, she had posed for him in the nude. She watched the back of his head and sensed his embarrassment. She hastily picked up her clothes and started to put them on. She had an overwhelming urge to show him her breasts. He had painted them when they were immature. The long frustrated nights had matured them. If he saw them now he would want to paint them. They would come alive on the canvas. She remembered that he had cut his hand. She felt ashamed for not having asked about it at once. She rushed to him impulsively before she had covered her bosom.

«How is your hand ?»

His muscles tightened tensely. He didn't want to see her bare breasts. Obeying his unvoiced wish, she covered her breasts with her hands.

«A sinful woman like that isn't worth one drop of your precious blood,» she whispered to him. To herself, she said : «What are you saying Dawlat ? And so early in the morning too ! Why should you be talking about sinfulness now ? You always manage to say the wrong thing.»

He turned round and faced her. He stared into her face.

«Sinful ?» he asked in an injured voice.

She saw his eys involutarily straying to her breasts. She thrilled.

«Yes, sinful,» she repeated in a caressingly seductive voice. «Every body knows that.» She expected him to say something flattering about her breasts. Instead, he gripped her arms harshly and shook her.

«How do you know that ?» He demanded. Drops of sweat sprang on his forehead. She gently wiped them off with her fingers. His grip relaxed.

«How do you know that ?»

She ignored the question. She was happily excited. «It must have cost you some effort to find my place. It's the first time you visit me in my humble garret. I had intended to invite you ; to celebrate together.»

«How do you know she is sinful ?» he asked. His voice sounded strange in her ears. She looked carefully into his eyes ; they were bloodshot. She was torn between two impulses.

«Sit down and rest,» she said. I'll make you a glass of tea.»

He sat down on the edge of the bed. His pallor deepend, as if he were bleeding.

«Fatahiyya ...,» he stammered.

Dawlat passionately wished she could close her hands on Fatahiyya's neck.

«She is a faithful woman,» she reluctantly declared. «She safeguarded her husband's honour in his absence.»

Wafiq drew a deep breath. Dawlat squatted on the floor to light the stove. She gathered her dress to do this, revealing her bare legs. She was pleased that he could see her legs as well.

«Get your face away from the stove. The flames !» He warned.

She trembled in ecstasy. Wafiq loved her. She put the kettle on and lifted her head. She found him holding his forehead in his hand as if he was afraid it would drop off onto the lighted stove.

«Yes, the flames,» she whispered in a dancing voice. She hugged him with her eyes and cajoled : «Wafiq, Wafiq ! You're tired. Why don't you lie down for a bit on my bed ?»

He burst out, nearly knocking her down. «Why then did I see tears in your eyes ?»

She was deeply shaken. Impulsively her hands darted towards him as if to protect him from falling on the stove.

«Why the tears ?» He insisted.

«They were the tears of unhappiness. Because of the separation. you ...»

«You'r lying !»

She thought the fire had gone out. She looked at the stove.

«God commands us to be discreet,» she said inadvertently.

Wafiq stiffened. Dawlat smelt the aroma of the tea and switched off the stove. Wafiq noiselessly disappeared. She poured the tea in a glass. She heard a faint noise ; she paused and turned round. Wafiq wasn't in his place. She glanced at the bed ; it was empty. Her eyes darted in every direction, in terror. She pricked her ears and sharpened her senses. She heard the faint patter of feet on the wooden stairs. She snatched a shawl and threw it over her bare chest, threw it away, then hastily picked it up again and draped it over her head and shoulders. She leapt down the stairs, but the sound of the footsteps had disappeared. She paused at the door of the building and looked around. She thought she glimpsed him turning into another alley. She rushed after him, but he had melted

in the crowd. She wanted to lean against a wall. The shawl slipped off her head uncovering her bare bosom. She started and slapped her chest in shame. She quickly slipped back into the dark well of the tenement-house.

7.30 a.m.

He stared steadily in front of him as he walked. His eyes didn't blink once. Was he stepping on the ground, or was the ground stepping on him ? The houses crowded round him and piled on his chest. The people around him pierced his eyes, like spears, He darted blindly through them on his way to Fatahiyya. Dawlat had talked of dishonour and public disgrace. The interrogator had said : «You wife is extremely attractive.» His mother had said : «You became a father after you went to prison.» The blood rushed into his eyes. Someone collided with him, then another, and another. They pressed on him. He wanted to push them away, but his hands were paralysed. Fatahiyya whispered in his ears : «I want you all to myself, to make up for all the lonely nights.» She had been making fun of him. He would go to her and sink his eyes into hers. He quickened his steps. His feet could still move. He felt reassured. He was still capable of action. The merry voice greeted his ears. His heart gave a thump. He stopped. The merry notes swept over him calling, «Blessed be the prophet !» He saw the man coming towards him. It seemed to him that he too was unconsciously moving towards the man. As he drew nearer, the man slackened his pace as if he knew that he was looking for him. He shut his eyes mentally without closing his lids and stared ahead of him unseeing. In a little while he realized that he had gone past the man and left him behind. His desire to speak to him had evaporated. He never wanted to hear the merry notes of his voice again. He wanted to speak to Fatahiyya, the woman who had deceived him. He laughed at himself : What a fool he had been to go out looking for that man in the small hours as if his life had hung on his lips ! What an idiot ! The interrogator's looks had often told him that he was an idiot. What had the man with the merry voice got to do with his wife's case ? Unless of course he was the man who had fathered Samih ! The thought made him quiver with rage. His hands which had dangled limply by his sides clenched. They

weren't as helpless as he had thought. He would go back to the man and close his hands on his neck. It seemed to him for a moment that his son bore a strong resmblance to the man. A furious storm erupted inside him. But he didn't turn back. He felt himself contract and harden into a sharp spear ; he was poised to spring into Fatahiyya's heart. He firmly took the direction of his home.

He heard sergeant Omar's voice shouting the morning call in the prison court-yard. He turned his head to look. Shalabi was inviting him to smoke a hookah. He slumped into a wooden chair.

«The district people are upset Mr. Wafiq. They never expected that you would allow that woman ...» he didn't finish. He got up and went away without saying another word.

Wafiq found himself running. Shalabi's voice kept echoing in his ears until it was drowned in the raging storm that thundered in his brain. Fatahiyya was a sinful woman. He jumped up a few steps. It was dark inside the house. He paused and leant against the banister panting. He gulped down some of the bitterness that filled his mouth and resumed the stairs. He thought he heard Shalabi speaking at the bottom of the stairs. He looked down and wished he could leap down and land on his head and crush him. He pummelled the door with his fists. Fatahiyya didn't answer. The loud banging seemed to break open the flood-gates of terror. He saw himself being dragged away and shoved into a dark locked cell. He was assailed on every side by terrifying voices. His panic gathered into his fists and exploded into a riot of knocking that threatened to break down the door. He clawed at the door with his nails. She was in there with a man. He had taken them by surprise. She was delaying to gain time. He knew her ; she was cunning ! The door finally gave way. He rushed directly to the bedroom. She wasn't in the bed. He found some of her clothes lying about. He stamped them underfoot. He would surprise them in the other room. He caught himself screaming her name. His feet slackened. Perhaps he had hastily jumped to conclusions ! The other room was also deserted. It struck him that he was behaving very foolishly. He moderated his tone and called out : «Fatahiyya !» She had probably gone out to buy his food, he thought. His eyes travelled round the bedroom looking for some evidence to support

this hypothesis. His eyes tired of wandering ; they lingered over Samih's clothes. He wanted to see Samih. She must have taken him along. He desperately wanted to hear him pipe out the phrase : «sweets, Wafiq.» He slipped his hand into one of Samih's pockets. It was stuffed with sweets. He picked up some of the boy's clothes and held them close to his chest. He made his way to the studio. He closed the window and stared at his paintings in the dark. His eyes lighted on Fatahiyya's face. He gazed into her eyes. She didn't flinch or lower her eyes. A hardened profligate ! He sat on the floor at an angle from which he could see Fatahiyya if she came in. He crossed his legs under him like a Buddah. He lighted some coal. He realized that he was still holding Samih's clothes. He longed to drink up the flames that blazed in his dark corner. He had a violent fit of coughing. The image of Dawlat's bare breasts sprang into his eyes. He bent his head and kissed his son's clothes.

9.15 a.m.

Nahid prepared the coffee and lit a cigarette. She took a sip from her cup with relish. Fatahiyya rummaged in her bag for the flat key.

«You are an experienced woman. Answer me.» she repeated.
Her mother swallowed the smoke of her cigarette and examined her nails.

«The light has died in his eyes,» Fatahiyya wailed. «Can love die mother ?»

The human spark dies out in prison.

Fatahiyya was silent. She fidgeted in her seat. Her mother sipped her coffee noisily. Fatahiyya raised her eyes to her face. It was thin and pale. She saw the ravages of time and loneliness on it. Her father had deserted her mother a long time age. She had nearly forgot that she had a father. «He hasn't written to me for a long time,» she murmured. Her words stirred and disturbed her mother ; but it didn't show on her face. Only the cup of coffee shook in her hands. «He's been gone a long time. Time flies,» Fatahiyya stammered. Her mother refilled her cup and this time she savoured the taste of the freshly

made coffee. Fatahiyya couldn't resist asking her where her thoughts had wandered to. She felt secretly happy that she knew exactly where Wafiq was. She would find him in the studio when she got home. He would be finishing her portrait while he waited for her. She would take him into her arms, and soak up his sadness, and refresh him with her gentle love. The sparkle would come back into his eyes. She reached for her handbag. Her mother took the last sip of her second cup of coffee. She twirled the cup in her hands as if she was trying to read into the smears of the coffee dregs some hidden secret. She picked up her daughter's hand and kissed it. It took Fatahiyya sometime to realize what her mother had done. She embraced her warmly and looked into her eyes. There, she read her innocence.

«If people only knew you as you are !» she exclaimed.

Her mother lowered her eyes.

«Wafiq must know,» Fatahiyya added emphatically. It was as if she was trying to convince herself. Her mother bit her lower lip.

«Why haven't you told your husband the truth ?» She suddenly exploded. «Why didn't you tell him straight out'my mother trades in vice' ? Why don't you talk to your husband instead of talking to your dog ? I heard you speaking to that black beast the last time I came to see you. You're lost ! You're not the daughter I raised anymore, not the girl who came to me one night and said defiantly «I wan't this man». Do you remember ? I didn't say anything then. But when I saw Wafiq, I hated him at once, hated his obvious weakness. I couldn't sleep that night. I remembered my youth. I too had gone to my father and said, «I want this man.» He had refused and had woken up one morning to find me gone. I packed my bag and followed the man I loved. I watched you all night as you lay in bed, and in the morning I said, go ahead and marry him. I was afraid for you. I wanted to spare you what I had been through. Your father never forgave me for having eloped with him : he held it against me, and deserted me when you were only a child. I bore the burden of my decision alone and never complained of the consequences. I didn't even cry when they closed the

hand-cuffs round my wrists. What has happened to you ? Has he sapped your courage ? Why didn't you tell him about me ? What happened was the will of God. If he doesn't accept it, pack your things and come here. It is your courage that has died, not the light in his eyes. Dry your tears. Wafiq has always been a weakling. I offered to tell him myself, but you cowered. You wouldn't face it out. And look where your cringing has got you ! You spend your nights in fear and anxiety. What are you afraid of ? You won't be at a loss for a man to marry you. Sayed «Bey», as you very well know, is at your beck and call. He told me that he would always wait for you and never give up. And consider what you will gain — a huge car, and an endless supply of money. Wait, don't snatch your bag and rush off ! I am nearly finished. I have only one more thing to say. Believe me, if you tell Wafiq, he may rage and fume, but it won't last out the night. In the morning he will come to me and stand by me. The case is up tomorrow before the court. If I am not acquitted, I will go to the sanatorium in the evening. I am tired. Life has always been hard on me, but never this hard. I've often managed to get round it, but this time, it has waylaid me. Believe me. Courage fans the fires of love. My mother was a brave woman. She taught me how to be brave. Remember that love cannot survive in the grip of fear.»

9.45 a.m.

Dawlat stood nervously at his door. Her heart fluttered. Wafiq was alone in the flat. She had hunted for him all over the district. Shalabi, the cafe-owner had taken pity on her and told her that Wafiq had insulted him then run home, and that his wife had gone out early in the morning. The memory of Wafiq's voice as he shouted «you're lying» engulfed her. Something she hadn't meant to imply had crept into her voice when she referred to Fatahiyya. She rested her head against the door and remembered how he had thundered at her when she said «God commands us to be discreet.» She pushed the door ; it opened. She made her way to the bedroom. She knew her way about the flat from long days past. Wafiq wasn't in the bedroom. Her eyes lingered over the empty bed ; she wanted to touch it. She saw Fatahiyya's clothes strewn about the room. A bitter feeling of envy

laced with self-pity invaded her. She walked towards the studio and went in. In was dark in there and stifling with smoke, She quicqly opened the window. The light flooded in revealing Wafiq sitting by the wall. «Wafiq !» she cried. He didn't respond and went on dragging at his hookah. She was at a loss. You misunderstood, she wanted to say : I didn't mean what you thought ; your wife is a faithful woman. But as his eyes caught hers, the words froze on her tongue. Only the word «Fatahiyya» slipped out of her lips. Silence reigned : there was only the sound of the water bubbling and gurgling in the hookah. Her senses seemed to stop functioning. She waited for him to say something. The minutes ticked away ; Wafiq said nothing. She gulped and quietly slid down beside him on the floor. «You left me,» she murmured, «without even saying goodbye. We don't stand on ceremony you and I, and of course my place is yours. But, still ...» She swallowed a lump in her throat. Wafiq coughed. An anguished look came into her eyes. Her hand slowly enfolded his. He stopped coughing. She kept his hand in hers and saw an expression of contentment spread over his face. «You sit alone in the dark ?» She whispered. She wanted to get up and shut the window, but she didn't want to let go of his hand : she might not find another excuse to hold it when she came back.

«Shut the window,» Wafiq said in tired voice.

She got up reluctantly and closed the shutters. She went to the the door of the studio and shut it as if he had meant her to do that as well. She wished Fatahiyya wouldn't come home now. She went back and sat close to him, her body touching his. The minutes ticked away. He didn't seem annoyed. Intuitively she sensed that he wanted this. She bit her lips and took refuge in silence. Her breath came on quickly and noisily. She was afraid her panting would betray her feelings. «It's hot,» she said by way of explanation, but immediately winced as she expected him to ask her to open the door to let in some air. She had used the wrong words : she had meant to say «take off your galabiyya,» just as he used to ask her in the past when she posed for him. She used to strip off as soon as the window was closed. «It's different now,» she said to herself. «Now he has Fayahiyya.» But Fatahiyya was out ; she had gone.

«Don't you want to paint me again ?» she asked timidly. She listened to his breathing. Wafiq was burning. Her hands reached out for him. She felt as if she had walked a whole life-time to reach him. She touched his chest and brought her face close to his. She looked into his eyes. They glowed with the flames of passion. She called him to her in a choking voice, and his fire engulfed her as he whispered her name. Her desire blazed in a mad frenzy. She kicked away the hookah with her foot and enveloped him. She squeezed and drank him to slake the thirst of long, long years.

10.30 a.m.

Fatahiyya left her mother's flat and hurtled down the stairs as if she was running away. Her mother's voice chased her, ringing in her ears. «Love cannot survive in the grip of fear.» She closed her fists tightly as if she was squeezing the life out of something ... out of her fear. She would crush her fear. She would run to him now ; he would be in the studio painting her portrait. She would bury his head in her breasts and say ; «The bastards arrested my mother when you were away. The case will be judged tomorrow. She will be acquitted, there is no doubt of that ; the lawyer assured her. They accused her of dealing in vice. But you wouldn't believe that about my mother Wafiq ? You know her. She's a decent woman.» She mustn't let him say anything. She would hug him and melt him in her breath. «I didn't want to add to your troubles. That's why I didn't tell you before. You've been through enough. I bore the burden alone. How I cried at night ! You saw my tears. I cried because I was hiding something from you. But I can't bear it any longer. My mother couldn't be what they say Wafiq ! I saw some men and women at her place once, but she told me that they only came to play cards and drink coffee. Their visits warmed her cold nights and dispelled her loneliness. My father deserted her. She had loved him, had given up everything for his sake. She had eloped with him. He had been happy at first. It had pleased him to think that she had run away from her home for his sake, he told me. But it didn't last. His love turned to loathing. He loathed her body every time he slept with her.» The heat stifled her. She remembered Wafiq lying beside her last night.

He had kept away from her. He must have been tired ; his hand must have hurt. She reproached herself for not having tried to make him talk. She recalled the look in his eyes ... as if something had snapped inside him. It had something to do with her, she was sure. «It's your courage that has died,» her mother had said. Her mother ought to know, with all her experience.

«Hurry up,» she shouted at the cab-driver.

«The road is jammed ; there seems to be an accident,» he replied.

It was hot and stuffy inside the car. She opened the window. A scorching gust of air hit her in the face. «Stay with me today,» her mother had begged ; she had wanted to add, «come with me to the cour tomorrow.» She hadn't said it, but Fatahiyya had read it in her face. She would tell Wafiq and go with him to the court in the morning. She would surprise her mother. Wafiq must hear the verdict of not guilty with his own ears. She felt suddenly afraid. Where had Wafiq gone last night ? He had stared into her face before leaving and she had pretended to be asleep. She had expected him to kiss her after kissing Samih. She had left Samih with a neighbour. «I won't be long,» she had said.

She glanced at her watch. She longed to hug Samih. She would take him out and buy him a new pair of shoes. The cab was still caught in the jam. She thought of getting out and walking home.

«Of all the days ! Why should an accident happen this morning ?» She exclaimed in irritation.

«It seems a car has knocked down someone,» the driver explained.

An ambulance appeared noisily on the scene.

«Is there another route ?» Fatahiyya asked.

«We are caught in a lane. I can't get out. We have to wait,» the driver replied.

She closed her eyes. She remembered the morning Wafiq came to see her at the university. His eyes had been eager ... as if he wanted to carry her off and fly away. She suddenly wanted to cry.

11.00 a.m.

There was a long pause. «Open the window,» Dawlat heard him say. She listened. His voice was tired. She shrank back into her place and wiped her hands on her bare breasts. Wafiq's smell was on her hands. She looked at him and lingered over the thick forest of hair on his chest. She felt contented. She wished he would look at her too.

«The door ?» she inquired.

«The window,» he repeated without looking at her.

She had wanted to walk naked in front of him, but now she would have to put on her clothes since she was going to open the window. She slowly picked up her clothes. Wafiq got up and went to the door. He opened it and went out. She finished dressing and went to the window. She looked at her reflection in the window pane. She tied her kerchief and smoothed her eyebrows, then opened the window. She wished Fatahiyya could see her now. She tidied up the room putting back in order a few scattered items. She picked up some live coals off the floor. They scortched her fingers. She groaned and cried out calling Wafiq. Suddenly a wave of self-admiration swept over her. She felt refreshed like a wild flower after the rain ; she swayed in savage pride. But she was still thirsty. She had only had a drop and she needed all the waters of the sea. Her eyes fell on a painting that had been knocked off in the turmoil. She picked it up and looked as it. It was Fatahiyya's unfinished portrait. She remembered Wafiq saying once : «I cannot finish a painting once my feeling for it dies.» She flushed with pleasure. She saw her own portrait with the red kerchief hanging on the wall. He had kept it all these years. «What a genuine person you really are Wafiq ! A person who knows the real value of things and people !» she mentally exclaimed. She dropped Fatahiyya's portrait back on the floor and kissed her own. Wafiq was late coming back. Had he gone to the bedroom ? She called out his name. The door of the flat was wide open. He had left her and gone out.

11.30 a.m.

Wafiq didn't care where he went. He only knew that he didn't want to meet anyone he knew. He stopped for a glass of fruit juice. He came across a man selling second-hand shoes. He liked a pair, bought the shoes and put them on, leaving the man his old ones. He strolled away. He saw a hand-cart heaped high with sycamore figs. He liked the voice of the pedlar and bought a few. Another pedlar was selling children's toys. Wafiq pushed his way through the crowd and bought a toy for Samih. He examined it with great pleasure. He found himself in front of a shop selling fire-arms. He liked a gun and bought it. He hid it in his clothes. He felt safe. He looked up and saw two men quarelling. He stopped and watched. They didn't come to blows, only screamed and shouted at each other. He was annoyed.

His feet couldn't carry him any further. He slumped down onto the pavement. The bag of figs was still in his hand. He ate a ripe one. His eyes caught a figure speeding by. It was Sheikh El-Bideeni, his cell-mate. He sprang to his feet and ran after him. A memory flashed across his mind : they came at dawn and wove the ropes for the gallows in front of the cell ; at sunrise they took Sheikh El-bideeni away to carry out the death-sentence ; he saw the man's face ; not a muscle moved ; they put the rope round his neck. Wafiq shut his eyes and waited for the dying man's scream. There was a burst of uproarious laughter from the guards. They had only staged a practical joke.

He pushed aside the people who blocked his way and obstructed his progress. He wanted to embrace the man, to cry on his shoulders. But, like a spirit, the man had melted into thin air. He strained his neck and thought he heard the Sheikh's sweet voice crying «God is the avenger !» Another voice, a merry one, rang out : «Blessed be the prophet !» The voices merged. He recalled the features of Sheikh El-Bideeni — the patient eyes, the frayed lashes. He remembered Sergeant Omar's warnings : «If only you could save yourself from total ruin ...» His teeth bit into his lower lip. The pain made him laugh. He remembered Samih and looked for the toy. It wasn't there. He had lost it. He quickly retraced his steps

to the place where he had sat down on the pavement. He couldn't find it. His memory became confused. After a while, he saw the toy in the hands of a little boy. He rushed at him ; the boy ran ; Wafiq ran after him. He suddenly stopped realizing the foolishness of what he was doing. He would buy another toy. But the pedlar had left. His back ached. He remembered the whip that had lashed his back. Why hadn't he at once told them what they had wanted to hear ? He wished he could take off his galabiyya and walk about naked.

He heard a man singing a sad ballad. He moved towards him. He sounded like Dawlat's father. He scrutinized his short fez and lined face. Father Hussein ! He rushed at him longingly. The singer didn't notice him and went on with his ballad. Wafiq stiffened.

His hand groped for the gun as his mind dwelt on the image of Fatahiyya crying in bed.

12 noon

Dawlat heard Fatahiyya calling Wafiq. She froze in front of the mirror where she had stood adorning herself. Wafiq's wife was suddenly behind her. Fatahiya stood aghast gaping at the sight. «You! Dawlat ? !» she screamed. Dawlat's hand tightened convulsively on the lipstick she was holding. «Where's Wafiq ?» Fatahiyya screamed at her.

Dawlat's voice stuck in her throat. She made a gesture indicating that he was out. Fatahiyya understood. She paused and swallowed. Dawlat flung away the lipstick and tore out of the flat. Fatahiyya didn't move, as if Dawlat had not left. She surveyed herself in the mirror. Her face was pale ; she rubbed her cheeks hard with her fingers. She went and sat on the edge of the bed and took off her shoes. She looked under the bed and round the room. She got up and made her way to the studio. She remembered that she had looked in there as soon as she came back. Her eyes strayed to the place where Wafiq usually kept her unfinished portrait. Had he finished it ? It wasn't there. A sense of premonition gripped her heart. Her eyes lighted on Dawlat's portrait. Her anger surged. She

flung the portrait across the room. She shouldn't have let her slip out of her hands. She had found her in the bedroom ! A woman in her bedroom ! Wafiq must have brought her there. No, Wafiq couldn't ; he adored her. He had done all he could to shorten his prison term for her sake, had even told on some of his mates who had kept some forbidden item hidden in the cell. «I did it for your sake,» he had said, «to come back to you Fatahiyya. I wanted you. I wanted a breath of fresh air.»

She breathed in deeply the memory of these words, and the sound of his voice seemed to fill her lungs. Her love blazed. She tossed her hair back and looked at the paintings that surrounded her. She wanted to melt into their shadows. She was everything to him. the life he poured into his colours. He had nothing to spare for any other woman. She looked for her new portrait. She saw it lying upside down on the floor. She laughed. That girl did it. Jealous. Wafiq would come back soon and spend the night in her arms.

She thought she heard him breathing in the hall. She ran out. She thought she caught a glimpse of him going out. She hurried to the stairs ; but he wasn't there. She went to the window and leaned out. Dawlat was standing at the door. She would go down and slap her hard on the face. She started putting on her shoes. By the time she had finished, the impulse had died down. She kicked off her shoes in the dining-room and sat in a comfortable chair. Her breath came evently. She began to think. Dawlat must have come to ask Wafiq for some favour ; he had always been kind to her. She had found the door open — Wafiq always left the door open ; closed doors gave him a feeling of claustrophobia. Fatahiyya jumped out of her seat and paced round the room talking to herself. «Wafiq came back. He didn't find me. He couldn't stand the place without me and went out again. The flat seemed to him like a prison without me. Oh ! Wafiq, my love !»

She noticed a layer of dust on the dining table. She traced on it with her fingers. It was thick. She must get the house cleaned before Wafiq came back. Quickly she took off her clothes. The ambulance siren echoed in her head. She laughed as she remembered Dawlat's crudely painted face.

5.30 p.m.

He finally found the building. He scrutinized its exterior. His eyes reverted to the number plate to make sure it was the building where the man lived — the man who had bought five of his paintings. He jumped up the few marble steps at the entrance. He passed through the glass doors. The porter stopped him. He flung the name of the man into his face. The dark porter led the way to the flat he was seeking. Wafiq tried to shake him off but failed. The porter rang the bell. Wafiq had no idea what he would say to the man. He hadn't prepared anything ; he had only thought of visiting the man on whose account he had gone to prison. He racked his brain feverishly. He could say : «I came to thank you for your interest in my exhibition.» But that was years ago ! He would say : «I came to tell you that I have finished several paintings which I feel certain will interest you.» The porter rang again.

The door opened revealing a tousled head and a tired face. Wafiq knew at once that he had come to the wrong building. That wasn't the man he had met on his way to a concert and had embraced. Wafiq began to sweat and stammer.

«Mr. Wafiq !» the man exclaimed in a cheerful welcoming voice. «What a lovely surprise ! Come in.» The blood shot into Wafiq's eyes. «Who would have believed it ! Mr. Wafiq Kamel, the artist, in my home ? !» the man went on. Wafiq swallowed. The man chattered on as he led him to the guest room : «Excuse my appearance. I was having a nap. I recognized you at once, though you have changed a good deal I must say.»

Wafiq shifted uneasily in his seat. His eyes scoured the walls anxiously in search of his paintings.

«I have tried to keep up with your news from the papers,» the man said with interest, «expected to hear of another exhibition. But something seems to have kept you quite busy all this time. Pity. Your last exhibition was a great success.»

Wafiq didn't find a trace of his art on the walls. It irritated him. «Do you know me ?» he blurted out angrily.

«Of course. Who doesn't know the artist Wafiq Kamel ?» the man said soothingly, as if he was apologizing for some offense he had unwittingly committed.

Wafiq realized that he hadn't expressed himself correctly.

«Do I know you ?» he asked.

The man looked puzzled. He was at a loss what to say and took refuge in silence.

«Do I know you ?» Wafiq repeated, stressing his words.

«This is for you to say,» the man answered making a gesture with his hand to support his meaning.

«But I am asking you.»

«Of course your know me. I went to your exhibition. I liked your paintings . I picked one, no, three, no ... five paintings. I bought them and paid you.»

«Did I see you after that ?»

«Let me see ... Yes, I think you did. I remember meeting you...»

«On your way to a concert,» Wafiq prompted.

«Oh, yes. I remember. Forgive me. My memory isn't what it used to be. Yours is good ; you're still young. I remember that you embraced me as friends do. You were very kind.»

«But are we friends ?» Wafiq asked defensively, as if he was fending off an accusation .

The man laughed. «But you've behaved exactly as if we were ! You have dropped in without notice, as a friend would.»

«We're not friends,» Wafiq said gravely.

They were silent. A servant brought two cups of coffee. The man handed Wafiq one. Wafiq slowly took it. The man lit a cigarette. He didn't offer Wafiq one.

The man took a long and noisy sip out of his cup, then placed it on the floor beside his seat. «What is it exactly you want,» he finally asked.

Wafiq's hand shook. He hadn't expected such a question. He quickly reeled off his initial question : «Do I know you ?»

The man hadn't expected Wafiq to reiterate his question. «This is for you to say,» he said once more in joking tones.

«I did say. But the interrogator wouldn't believe me,» Wafiq burst out.

«Interrogator ? ! What interrogator ? !»

«They came in the night and took me away, and for five long years they kept hitting me on the head with quesions, quesions ...»

The man wen pale. His foot kicked the cup accidentally. The coffee spilled onto the carpet. «This is old history,» he said impatiently. «Your're stirring up the past».

«But recent history to me. I am still living it Mr...»

«Izzat Kahilah,» the man prompted as if seizing at a chance to ease off the mounting tension.

«Izzat Kahilah Abdul Karim.»

The man laughed to cover up his sudden confusion. «You seem to know the name of my grandfather as well,» he said.

«It's my case,» Wafiq said, feeling the gun in his pocket.

The man felt vaguely apprehensive. «But ...»

«I don't want you to defend yourself. I am not an interrogator.»

The man edged nearer him. «What do you want from me Mr. Kamel ?» he pleaded.

«Why did they arrest me ?»

«Did they arrest you ?» the man asked thoughtfully.

Wafiq kept silent as if to give the man a chance to think out his answer.

«So that was why I never found any news of a new exhibition !»

Wafiq wanted to pull out his gun, but he was holding the cup of coffee in his right hand and his left was still bandaged. «Why did they arrest Wafiq Kamel,» he repeated instead. The interrogator's words rang into his ears : «What do you know about the man you embraced in front of the university ? You mean to tell me that you embraced a total stranger ? A man whose name you didn't even know ? !» He choked with emotion. «He said how could I embrace a man whose name I didn't even know ?»

«And why should they arrest you on my account ?» the man asked protestingly, his fear dispelled. «I wasn't arrested. A man came to see me. A polite man. I remember him quite well. He had a white face and his shoes were well-polished. He took me to a building somewhere away. They asked me several questions. They had been told I was a traitor. But I am a true patriot. My history bears testimony to this. It has many a creditable page. Soon they realized their mistake and apologized. The white man accompanied me right to the door of my car as I remember. He was abjectly sorry that he had insulted an honourable man. He never come again.»

Wafiq gulped down his coffee. He saw sergeant Omar fixing his eyes into the eyes of the man sitting next to him. He heard him say : «If treason is proved, you'll have to pay for it with your neck.»

«They were looking for another man,» the man went on, his composure and confidence fully restored. «I discovered that afterwards Sometimes they make mistakes.»

«Was I that other man ?»

«I don't know. But I could find out for you if you wish. I have good contacts in the right places.»

It seemed to Wafiq at this moment that getting to the bottom of this matter was a question of life and death. «Would you find out the truth for me Izzat Bey ?» he pleaded.

«It's a simple matter.»

«I need to know. I beg of you.»

«You don't have to beg me.»

«They held me for years, five years !»

The man removed his glasses and scrutinized Wafiq.

The words rushed out of Wafiq's mouth uncontrollably. It was as if suddenly all his defences had broken down :

«I can't sleep any more !»
« . . . . »

«The brush shakes in my hand !»
« . . . . »

«The colours merge in my eyes !»
« . . . . »

«My head is stuffed with filth !»
« . . . . »

«My wife has been unfaithful !»
« . . . . »

«My son isn't my son !»

Wafiq swayed on his feet and nearly fell. The man caught him and steadied him. He supported him and steered him gently towards the door. «I am very sorry for you Mr ...» he said as he firmly shut the door behind Wafiq and carefully locked it. He hurried back into the room to mop up the coffee and remove the stain from the expensive carpet.

11.00 p.m.

The night was dark. Wafiq hadn't yet come home. Dawlat sat at the bottom of the stairs leading to his flat supporting her head on her hand and staring in the direction of the entrance. She was waiting for Wafiq. Her hands and feet had gone numb. She dwelt on the memory of Wafiq in her arms. Where did he go ? She wanted to see him alone, here, in the darkness, to hug him and inhale his breath. She longed to lose herself once more in the forest of hair on his chest. She must tell him that Fatahiyya had

caught her in the bedroom. She had gone there to look for him, she would tell him, for he had left without telling her. She had expected him to come back in a little while. She rubbed her cheeks. Of course she wouldn't tell him that she had messed about with Fatahiyya's things. She felt that the rouge she had lavishly smeared on her cheeks would never come off. She thrilled at the memory of that moment. She had wanted to paint her face and then go and lie on Wafiq's bed. «If I had seen her there, I would have strangled her !» She remembered that she had walked to the bed and touched it. It had felt soft. It should hold her own body. She realized that she could no longer keep away from him. She felt furious. He was her man. She would never let go of him. She blamed herself for running away when Fatahiyya surprised her in the bed-room. She should have faced her and looked her boldly in the eye. She had inspired Wafiq's finest paintings and helped him build his great reputation. How often had she stripped before him and let him drink in her freshness and pour it into his paintings ! She smelt her hands. His smell was still on her body. Her heart beat fast; his image of Fatahiyya had been shattered ; she had seen it in his eyes. She remembered her words. «In such matters God commands us to be discreet,» she had said. She was proud of herself. She could always manipulate words and turn them into lethal weapons. She had waited long enough. She would claim her man. The district people talked to her about Wafiq as if he were her man. They never acknowledged Fatahiyya as his woman. She imagined him in Fatahiyya's arms and was frantic. Her fury roared. She would go up to the flat. She had waited like this all day. She was afraid of what Fatahiyya might do to him. He wouldn't feel angry because she had gone to the bedroom. What was more natural than for a woman to go into the bedroom of her own man ? She felt hungry. She hadn't eaten all day. Wafiq would soon come bringing hot food. They would sit side by side on the stairs. She would feed him and he would feed her. She remembered how she had kicked the hookah, scattering the red-hot coal all over the floor. She had folded herself about him and squeezed him and drunk his juices. Had he gone to her garret ? Could he be waiting for her there while she waited for him here ? Could he have slipped past her and gone up to his flat. She would run up and tear her man

out of the arms of that thieving female, that accursed usurper. She needed him to warm her bed. She felt the cold gnawing at her bones. She jumped to her feet and ran out into the street in the direction of her room.

12 midnight

He stood and watched her thoughtfully for a long time. She was sitting in his chair, her head slumped on the edge of the dining table, her long hair curling round her neck. She was fast asleep. The table was spread with food. She hadn't eaten ; the plate in front of her was unused. She had laid a place for him, but not for his son. She had changed his usual place at the table. He wouldn't sit there. He bit his lip. She was always careful to keep Samih out of his way. He pricked up his ears and listened. He wanted to hear his son breathing. He must be at her mother's. Her mother was a whore-monger. And Sheikh El-Bideeni had suffered long enough and was tired. He listened to her breathing. Fine strands of her soft hair flew up and down to the rhythm of her breathing. He didn't want her to wake up. She was wearing a violet nightdress. He hadn't seen it before. His eyes swept over the walls. They were of the some colour.

The clock struck 12.

It was midnight. He glanced at his watch. It had stopped. He wouldn't wind it. What use was time ? He wanted to stop the wall clock as well, but it was right above Fatahiyya's head. He would wake her up if he tried to reach if. He chewed on something. Dawlat's bare breasts flashed before his eyes. He would go to her room and bury his head in her nakedness. But not now. His eyes fell on Fatahiyya's face. It wore an expression of innocence. He noticed the black dog curled up at her feet. Something inside him quacked. He stared at him. He thought he was about to attack him. He ascertained that the gun was in his pocket. He had the eyes of the devil. He would spring at him any minute now. «Fatahiyya !» he screamed.

She started and opened her eyes. «Wafiq ? !»

He couldn't say «keep your dog away from me», for the dog was still fast asleep.

«It's very late. I've been waiting for you for ages ! Must have dozed off.» She yawned heavily. «Have you come in just now ?»

He took the gun out of his pocket.

«I cleaned the flat,» she went on. «Took a lot of work. It was very dusty.»

He placed the gun on the table quietly.

«I haven't eaten a thing all day. I put he food on the table and sat here waiting for you.»

Wafiq gulped.

«Where have you been all day ? You had already gone out when I woke up.»

He picked up the gun and ran his fingers over it. His hand trembled.

«I went to see my mother this morning. I left Samih with a neighbour. I had to see her.»

He put the gun in front of him.

«Poor mother ! She fell ...» She stopped in mid-sentence. She shuddered as she pointed inquiringly at the gun.

«It's a gun,» he said emphatically without looking at her.

«Where did youg get it ?»

«I bought it.»

She stretched her hand towards it. His hand shot out impulsively to stop her. She understood his meaning. Her hand stopped midway. «Why did you buy it ?» she asked in a vanquished tone.

«I liked it.»

She switched some plates about. The words she had meant to say froze on her lips. She felt vaguely uneasy. «The food has grown cold. Shall I warm it up ?»

Wafiq contemplated the gun.

«I dressed the salad the way you like it, with lemon juice and chillies.»

«I won't eat,» he said quietly.

«But you haven't eaten all day !»

«I won't eat.»

She looked up. The blood shot into her eyes. The man facing her was not Wafiq. He wore the face of a stranger.

«They are your favourite dishes Wafiq ! Look, my mother wants to see you. You go ...»

«Where did you go ?» he asked, still contemplating the gun.

«To my mother's. She asked me ...»

He shoved the newspaper cutting before her eyes. She trembled.

«This is you mother's picture, isn't it ?» he asked in a low confident voice.

«I was going to tell you tonight.»

«Read the date. It's an old paper.»

«She asked me not to tell you.»

«You deliberately planned together to keep me in the dark !»

«She wanted to tell you herself. Remember ...»

«And why hasn't she ?»

«Remember the last time she came ? She wanted to ...»

«But why didn't you, my own wife, tell me ?»

«You had so many things on your mind.»

«And you thought they've all cleared up tonight and so decided to tell me ?»

«No, I just couldn't bear to keep it from you any longer.»

«Why did you go to her ?»

«You've been different lately ...»

«And so you went to report me.»

«But my mother ...»

«Your mother is a whore-monger !»

«Don't ! She's innocent. In the morning she'll be acquitted. You will see. The lawer said so. She wants you to go with her to the court.»

«Whereas you went with her to Alexandria.»

«Only once. Just once. and I told you about it myself. I didn't know then. My mother is innocent !»

«She came and stayed here when I was in prison.»

«I was lonely and frightened. I asked her to come and live with me.»

«When I came out you told me that Mitwalli hadn't called on you once in all the time I was away.»

« .... »

«But when your mother was here you distinctly said : «Every-time your brother Mitwalli called, she tagged along.»

«I don't remember.»

«Don't deny it. I remember what you said word for word.»

«I may have said that. I was frantic, casting about for something to say to stop my mother from ...»

«To stop your mother from what ?»

«I was afraid the shock would be too much for you.»

«And what about that man ?»

«What man ?»

«The man who wants ...»

«He proposed to me when I was still a young school-girl in

uniform. We became engaged. I left him, and there's an end to it. It's all over.»

«Did he call on your mother when you were there ?»

«No.»

«And your mother ? What does she think ?»

«You know quite well what my mother thinks.»

«She wants you to leave me, doesn't she ?»

«But I love you.»

He was feverish. The searing pain of the old lashes on his back burst into flames. He tore off his shirt.

Fatahiyya grabbed at the opportunity afforded by the pause to plead her case. «I chose you because I wanted you,» she interposed. «I stood up to my mother. And when they took you away I fought the unknown. I locked my door. The crows wanted to prey on me, to tear at my flesh, but I was alert. I kept a constant vigil. I guarded my self and my home in the absence of my master. No man, nothing in the world, could make me give in or weaken. I kept myself safe and intact for you. I even gave up my mother this morning for your sake. I turned my back on the woman who gave me her whole life. I have no one left but you Wafiq, no one in this whole world !»

«What about Samih ?»

«................»

«Whose son is he ?»

«Whose son is he ? !»

«Yes, whose son ?»

«You deny your own son Wafiq ? ! Our son ? !»

His gaze shifted uneasily . «He is not my son.» He picked up the gun. The interrogator's voice thundered deafeningly in his head. «He hates me,» he shouted.

«Wafiq ! Don't !»

«Yes, he hates me.»

«He only needs time to get used to you. He was born when you were ...»

«Yes, yes ! Confess.» The hand holding the gun moved relentlessly closer. «Whose son is he Fatahiyya ?» he hissed.

«Wafiq ! Are you mad ? !»

«Don't shelter your lover.»

«But I love **you** Wafiq !»

There was a shot. He didn't realize that he had pulled the trigger. He heard screaming, heard himself screaming. He replaced the gun by the salad bowl.

«You say Samih is my son,» he went on. «If he is my son as you say, why then doesn't he love me ? Not once has he called me father. And when I kiss him he can barely stand my touch. A son likes to kiss his father Fatahiyya, doesn't he ?»

She gasped in her last throes.

«I don't like hedging,» he continued. as if she had answered him. «You'd better confess Fatahiyya. You haven't made a full confession yet. You won't be left alone until you do. They didn't leave me alone until I had made a full confession. I incriminated all my cell-mates. Better confess my love.»

He felt hungry. He took a handful of salad and stuffed it in his mouth. It needed more chillies. He would visit his mother. It was hot and stuffy in the flat. He opened the door and went out. He walked quickly as if he were running away. He gulped in the cool air. It struck him as he walked that he was not moving. The other passers-by were moving ; but he was at a standstill. The taste of the salad lingered in his mouth. Fatahiyya had added too much lemon juice. The sight of blood lingered in his eyes. He looked at his hands. He knew he was bleeding somewhere in the chest. Has there been a shot ? One only ? He hadn't heard it.

Shots usually made a loud bang, or so it was said. He quickened his steps. He wanted to lay his head on his mothers chest. She had lost her sight weeping for him. The man with the merry voice addressed him. He didn't catch what he said. The old jailer had once seen him troubled and had said : «If only you could protect your mind from disintegrating ! Keep it whole !» He remembered that he had heard an owl hoot in the morning. He also remembered that he had seized the old jailer by the throat and throttled him. But that had been only a dream. He had kicked off the covers in his sleep and consequently had had this terrible dream. He hadn't strangled Fatahiyya. No. He adored Fatahiyya. He pricked up his ears. He heard Samih cry : «Sweets, Wafiq !» He slapped him mentally on the face. He wanted to hear another word. Samih ! Where was Samih ? ! He didn't know. He hadn't asked her. «Wafiq, you're mad !» Fatahiyya had said. He avoided the house where Dawlat lived.

He walked through deserted streets. A strong light shone in his face. It annoyed him. He felt tired. He sat down on the step of a silent house. He was overcome by sleep. He woke up at Fatahiyya's voice. She was calling him. He opened his eyes. Fatahiyya wasn't lying by his side.

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